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An audit of alcohol brand websites

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Abstract

Introduction and Aims.The study investigated the nature and content of alcohol brand websites in the UK. Design and Methods.The research involved an audit of the websites of the 10 leading alcohol brands by sales in the UK across four categories: lager, spirits, Flavoured Alcoholic Beverages and cider/perry. Each site was visited twice over a 1-month period with site features and content recorded using a pro-forma. The content of websites was then reviewed against the regulatory codes governing broadcast advertising of alcohol. Results.It was found that 27 of 40 leading alcohol brands had a dedicated website. Sites featured sophisticated content, including sports and music sections, games, downloads and competitions. Case studies of two brand websites demonstrate the range of content features on such sites. A review of the application of regulatory codes covering traditional advertising found some content may breach the codes. Discussion and Conclusions.Study findings illustrate the sophisticated range of content accessible on alcohol brand websites. When applying regulatory codes covering traditional alcohol marketing channels it is apparent that some content on alcohol brand websites would breach the codes. This suggests the regulation of alcohol brand websites may be an issue requiring attention from policymakers. Further research in this area would help inform this process.[Gordon R. An audit of alcohol brand websites. Drug Alcohol Rev 2010]

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Life Sciences | Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

An audit of Alcohol Brand websites

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Audit of alcohol brand websites

ABSTRACT

Introduction and Aims: The study addresses an identified gap in the research and evidence base by investigating the nature and content of alcohol brand websites in the UK.

Design and Methods: The research involved an audit of the websites of the ten leading alcohol brands by sales in the UK across four categories: lager, spirits, FABs and cider/perry. Each site was visited twice over a one month period with site features and content recorded using a pro-forma. The content of websites was then reviewed against the regulatory codes governing broadcast advertising of alcohol.

Results: It was found that 27 of 40 leading alcohol brands had a dedicated website. Many sites featured a comprehensive and sophisticated content including sports and music sections, games, downloads and competitions. It could be construed that much of this content holds appeal for adolescents. A review of the application of regulatory codes covering traditional advertising found some content may breach the codes.

Discussion and Conclusions: The study further demonstrates the validity of, and need for further research, in this area. The findings suggest that some of the content of websites may appeal to young people and generate cause for concern. This stimulates debate over the regulation of alcohol marketing and identification of an effective policy response.

Introduction and Aims

A topic that has generated increasing societal concern in recent years is alcohol. Alcohol plays an important role in our culture and society. It acts as a social lubricant helping to socialise, celebrate, relax and party [1]. However alcohol related health and social harms are considerable and cost the UK in excess of £25 billion per year [2]. These include health harms such as liver disease, heart disease and cancer [3], but also include lost productivity, crime and disorder and breakdown in family relationships [2, 4, 5]. Given these problems attention has focused on factors that may contribute to drinking behaviours and alcohol related harm. One such factor that has been identified is that of alcohol marketing [6].

One of the major developments in alcohol marketing over recent years has been the increasing shift away from advertising spend, into other channels of communication [7, 8]. This is demonstrated by the distribution of the estimated £800m per annum total spent on alcohol marketing in the UK [9]. Of this approximately £300 million pounds is spent annually on alcohol advertising in the UK [10]; with the rest going on other 'below the line' channels such as sponsorship, new media and viral marketing [11].

The internet is one of the newer but fastest growing marketing communication channels available. The extant consumer and behavioural theory literature highlights the reach and impact of digital communications and the conduit with marketing and

consumerism [12, 13]. This is such that it is suggested to understand the net generation of people immersed in, and brought up among such technologies, is to understand the future [14]. Commerce has been quick to tap into this paradigm shift to sell products and services. Indeed a whole branch of marketing thought and practice has emerged known as e-marketing [15]. Sophisticated web technologies such as internet tracking ad-delivery systems now allow brands to market products at specific target audiences based on their consumption habits or lifestyle choices. The alcohol industry has been at the forefront of the use of new technologies such as the internet, and has made use of the emergence of social networking sites into modern lifestyles. Given the development of new media communications channels it is unsurprising to find that many alcohol brands have developed brand websites [16, 17, 18].

This paper builds upon previous work [8] examining the scope and nature of alcohol brand websites and their function as a channel of alcohol marketing. Primary research consisting of an audit of leading alcohol brand websites in the UK and the findings from content analysis - including a matrix of alcohol brand website content, is presented. Two detailed case studies of alcohol brand websites are then described demonstrating the extensive and sophisticated content contained in such websites. The article then examines the topic of the regulation by first of all applying existing regulations that apply to traditional channels of marketing to alcohol brand websites, before concluding with suggestions for regulatory change and further research in this area. Subsequent research on the impact of awareness of and exposure to alcohol marketing activity on behaviour is reported elsewhere [19].

The emergence of the World Wide Web and growth of internet access and use has had a considerable impact on the marketing discipline with Hoffman and Novak observing that the web has "far reaching scope and potential for transformation of the marketing function" [20, p51]. In the UK in 2007, an estimated £19.384 billion was spent on advertising, with £3.026 billion spent on internet advertising. This represents a 15.6% share of total expenditure, and internet advertising experienced a 39.5% year on year growth in expenditure in 2007 [10]. The potential power and reach of e-marketing is demonstrated by considering that an estimated 65-75% of the UK population has regular access to the internet [21, 22]. These figures are even higher for young people with approximately 84% of 15-24 year olds having internet access at home [21].

The alcohol industry has been quick to utilise the web as a channel for marketing its brands [6]. This generates societal concern given that systematic reviews of the impact of alcohol marketing on drinking behaviours have suggested it has a small but significant effect [23, 24]. Most leading alcohol brands now normally have a web presence, with dedicated brand websites featuring a range of content including marketing, sponsorship and branding activity. A prominent feature of these web-sites is promotion of alcohol branded merchandise which studies have demonstrated has a powerful impact on youth drinking behaviour [25, 26]. Indeed the aforementioned move away from alcohol marketing in the traditional mass media channels such as television, radio, magazines and newspapers into below the line activities accentuates the role of alcohol brand websites [8].

Despite the proliferation of marketing activity on the internet there is a paucity of research examining alcohol brand websites. To examine the extant literature in this

area, a literature search was conducted across four databases: Academic Search Complete, Business Search Complete, Pubmed and ISI Web of Knowledge searching for material published in English within the last ten years (2000-2010). Combinations of the following search terms using Boolean logic (AND, OR, NOT) were used; *alcohol, drinking, booze, internet, web, communications, marketing.* The search revealed a total of 111 articles of which only five relevant articles were identified. From this only one paper describing empirical research was found [8]. Reference chasing and a search for grey literature on Google identified another three reports, and two major empirical studies published in 1997 and 2003.

A study conducted by the Center for Media Education in the US in 1997 examined the content of over 100 alcohol and tobacco brand websites. The research found a total of 35 alcohol brand websites, many containing content such as interactive games, cartoons, at rooms, bulletin boards, logoed clothing and downloads such as screensavers and wallpapers [27]. The study report concluded that much of the content of alcohol brand websites featured material that may appeal to youth and under age audiences.

Another study carried out in the US by the Centre on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) featured an audit of 74 Alcohol brand websites [28]. The research found widespread use of games, interactive and high tech content such as downloadable content, cultural references, cartoons and graphics. The authors reported that the study "found widespread use of the kinds of features identified by the Center for Media Education (CME) as potentially attractive the underage youth", and alcohol brand websites were described as "offering a parade of attractions that appear to have little

to do with the quality or taste of the alcohol product but speak loudly to the culture and mores of the Internet user" [29, p2].

Research carried out in Australia, consisted of an audit of six popular alcohol brand websites. The study found content such as sport and music content, video games, downloads, irreverent humour, jokes and wind-ups and merchandising. It was found that some of the content such as features involving pin-up girls, swimsuit models, references to pornography, and strong associations with youth culture and language was extremely questionable and would break regulatory codes covering traditional advertising. The authors suggested that some of the sophisticated content may appeal to adolescents and concluded that "the internet provides an opportunity for alcohol marketing targeted at underage consumers" [8, p83]. The authors also highlighted the failure of regulatory controls to adequately govern internet and web activity.

The extant literature suggests that the marketing of alcohol on brand websites is an area that warrants attention and further research. Given the lack of existing research in this area, the present study described forthwith aimed to add to the evidence base.

Design and Methods

Design

Data was collected during the exploratory research stage of a study *Assessing the Cumulative Impact of Alcohol Marketing on Youth Drinking*, funded by the National

Preventive Research Initiative in the UK. Data and findings informed the design and development of a longitudinal cohort survey of adolescents as part of the same overall study [19, 30]. The study design was informed by, and adapted from research on tobacco marketing in the UK.

Setting and Sample

The study was conducted by examining the website presence of leading alcohol brands in the UK. The sample of alcohol brand websites audited consisted of the top ten brands by sales (£) in the UK in the lager, spirits, Flavoured Alcoholic Beverages (FABs) and cider/perry markets at the time the study was conducted [31]. Due to the fragmentation of the wine market and less focus on web communications in this category, data for wine brands was not collected. Table one below shows the top ten brands in each of the four alcoholic drinks categories.

TABLE ONE HERE

Data Collection

Each website was visited twice across a one-month period with the site features and content recorded according to a pro-forma. The pro-forma was designed based on previous tobacco research [32] and following consultation of the extant literature and aforementioned studies, and then adapted to suit the UK alcohol market and brand web-sites. This recorded information on age restricted entry or messages, headings, site sections, content of site sections, games or other interactive activities, brand

databases, special features, competitions and links to other websites. Inter-coder reliability checks among two researchers were conducted on all collected data to ensure consistency in coding, using joint probability of agreement, with a minimum level of agreement set at 85% and any inconsistencies discussed and resolved with a supervisor [33].

Results

Alcohol Brand Websites Content

Of the 40 brands examined in the website audit, 27 (67.5%) had a dedicated or shared (with other brands) website and only 13 (32.5%) had no dedicated website presence. Of the 27 brands that had a web presence all were found to have age restriction entry messages or requirements for site visitors to input a date of birth. Fifteen of the sites visited offered the option for visitors to register on to a brand database.

Ten alcohol brand sites contained either a sport section containing either sport related features, details of sports sponsorship, or references to sport. The most common sport mentioned was football (six websites); followed by Rugby (four websites) with one each for Golf, Fly Fishing, F1 Motor Racing, Motor Rally, Cricket and Horse Racing. Nine brand sites had a music section containing featuring profiles, news items, references, reviews, event details and sponsorship activities.

It was found that fifteen of the sites visited had interactive games such as video games or role playing games featuring the brand. Eleven of the websites contained downloadable content such as screensavers, wallpaper, music or video clips. The majority of sites, 20 out of 27 contained competitions for visitors to enter. Also, three websites contained content referring to driving or motor cars (for example formula one racing, rally driving or interactive video games). One website contained a sexual reference which consisted of a viral email template of membership of a 'swingers' club designed to be sent to friends as a joke. A matrix of the features and contents for each alcohol brand website visited is detailed in table two below.

TABLE TWO HERE

The results demonstrate the extent and nature of the content of alcohol brand websites. Furthermore it was found that in many cases they displayed a considerable degree of sophistication.

Case Studies

To help illustrate the sort of features and content that make up an alcohol brand website, demonstrating their sophistication, the following two case studies are described for the brands Carling (figure 1) and WKD (figure 2).

FIGURE ONE HERE

FIGURE TWO HERE

Regulation of Alcohol Brand Websites

When examining the content of the alcohol brand websites studied in the audit against the regulations governing advertising of alcohol in the UK, there are some examples where a suggested breach would occur if the rules were strictly applied to marketing on the web. Ofcom – the UK communications regulator contracted out responsibility for the advertising regulatory system in 2004. All of the UK advertising codes are administered by the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) who investigate and adjudicate on complaints. Currently there are two broadcasting codes covering alcohol advertising, which are written by the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) an industry populated body: the Television, and the Radio Advertising Standards Codes [34, 35]. The following section considers the application of these codes to the content of alcohol brand websites examined in the study.

Advertisements for alcoholic drinks must not be likely to appeal strongly to people under 18, in particular by reflecting or being associated with youth culture:

The content of many of the sites audited contained material that would likely appeal to underage consumers. Several of the sites visited contained arcade type games such as pinball, Ninja games or Killer Pool. Furthermore the colours and graphics used on the sites combined with downloadable content such as music, screensavers and wallpapers are likely to appeal to under age people also. Access to this content is largely unrestricted bar the warning messages or date of birth entry requirement on the entry pages to alcohol brand web sites.

Alcoholic drinks must not be advertised in a context of sexual activity or seduction but may include romance and flirtation subject to rule 11.8.2(a) (Youth appeal):

Although clear transgressions of this rule if it were applied to alcohol web sites were not found there were examples of content which sailed close to the wind. The Lambrini site offered guides to flirting, or for a girl's night out, and the WKD site featured a game in which players can create the perfect man or woman, while one of the wind-up features on the same site featured mock membership of a swingers clubs and showed suggestive images. In 2003 WKD was judged to have broken the Portman Group code of conduct, due to the inclusion of pole dancers and other features associating the product with sexual success on the website. As a result changes were made by WKD to the website [36].

Advertisements must not link drinking with the use of potentially dangerous machinery, with behaviour which would be dangerous after consuming alcohol (such as swimming) or with driving:

Three of the alcohol brand sites visited had clear links with driving given that one had a page dedicated to Formula 1 coverage (Budweiser), one contained pages about the World Rally Championship (VK Vodka) and one contained an interactive game in which players can 'Max' a motor by modifying it.

Advertisements for alcoholic drinks must not show, imply or refer to daring, roughness, aggression or unruly, irresponsible or anti-social behaviour:

During the audit some examples of website content that could be regarded as in breach of the regulations applied to advertising were found. For example one of the interactive games on the Fosters website 'we want you' involved three missions related to shutting down illegal barbies (bbq) by beating up someone, surveillance and a bust mission. On the WKD site the Ninja Arcade game featured characters that fight each other. In the Strongbow site there was an interactive game in which the object was to fire a strong-bow at various targets in a bar or club such as a beer glass, light fitting and DJ box. The bar also contained people sitting in stools who could be hit by the arrow. High scorers could register their details and win festival tickets.

Discussion and Conclusions

There are some limitations of the study that should be acknowledged. Firstly there is little in the way of an established literature and recognised methodology for studying alcohol brand websites, therefore the research methods used were exploratory in nature. Also the sample was restricted to the brand websites of the top ten brands in each alcoholic drinks category, except wine for which no data was collected. Expanding the sample to examine the websites of a larger range of alcohol brands would provide a richer data source. Another limitation relates to the fact that the study is cross sectional. Given the fast moving nature of the alcohol market – Magners cider has emerged to become a leading brand since the study was conducted; and e-

marketing – for example websites are updated on a regular basis, the findings from this study offer only a snapshot of alcohol brands site content. Tracking studies conducted over a longer period of time would enable a more comprehensive assessment of alcohol marketing activities on websites. Also alcohol marketing activity has expanded into other web 2.0 outlets such as social networking sites like facebook which enables electronic word of mouth promotion [], beyond the realm of this study. Finally studies such as this are only able to consider the nature and content of alcohol brand websites, and cannot inform us about any potential impact upon attitudes towards alcohol and drinking behaviours. However, such research can help to inform the design and development of consumer studies that investigate alcohol marketing and drinking attitudes and behaviour.

Brand websites move marketing beyond the limited scope of traditional communication channels, facilitating interactivity, improved targeting of audiences, and involving the active participation of consumers. This enables brands to build relationships with consumers, and communicate evocative and emotive brand messages, imagery and perceptions [37]. Research suggests that such activity can influence youth drinking behaviour [38, 39].

The results of the study demonstrate that alcohol marketing activity on brand websites is considerable. Often the sites are extremely sophisticated and contain a wealth of content both appealing and desirable for the target audience - often young people. There are justifiable concerns that some of the content may appeal to under age audiences. Furthermore, applying the regulations governing above the line alcohol advertising to alcohol brand websites suggests that some of the content would breach

the rules forbidding content from appealing to youth, or linking alcohol with driving or sexual and social success. This causes concern over the regulation of alcohol marketing and proposals for restrictions or bans covering web marketing [28, 40]. At the very least the same restrictions applying to traditional media should apply. Indeed policy-makers have started to recognise the importance of properly regulating new media channels such as the internet and websites in relation to alcohol [41].

Further studies on the nature, extent and impact of alcohol brand websites and other forms of e-marketing and new media marketing would be welcomed and would help inform the research and evidence base, as well as policy and regulation [41].

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