Regulation of alcohol advertising in Australia: case study of a failure

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

Publication Details
This conference paper was originally published as Jones, SC and Donovan, RJ, Regulation of alcohol advertising in Australia: case study of a failure, in Proceedings of the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, 1 - 5 December 2001, Massey University, New Zealand.

This conference paper is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/hbpsapers/87
REGULATION OF ALCOHOL ADVERTISING IN AUSTRALIA: CASE STUDY OF A FAILURE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to further the bridging of marketing theory and practice by disseminating to marketing practitioners the results of a recent study conducted for a public health audience. This paper has direct implications for the practice of ethical marketing and advertising of alcohol beverages in Australia. The study was designed to assess young people's perceived messages in three ads for a vodka-based pre-mixed alcohol beverage, and to assess the extent to which the ads appeared to be consistent with the industry’s voluntary code. Two convenience samples of young people, one aged 15-16 years and another aged 19-21 years, were exposed to three advertisements for the brand. Respondents completed a post-exposure questionnaire based on standard advertising copy testing procedures. The most frequently nominated open-ended responses to the main message of the ads related to the product’s delivering mood effects: both removal of negative emotions (e.g. “stress reduction,” “worries reduction”), as well as inducing positive states of arousal such as feeling “carefree” and gaining “increased enjoyment.” Consumption of the product was perceived to also offer “self-confidence,” “sexual/relationship success” and “social success.” These perceived messages are banned by the Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) and suggest that this campaign may in fact be the Code.

Introduction

The theme for ANZMAC 2001 is “Bridging Marketing Theory & Practice”. One of the major factors constraining the nexus between theory and practice are the limitations on dissemination of research findings. Many research findings with direct relevance to marketing practitioners (and theoreticians) are never made known to marketers because they are reported in journals in the fields of psychology, sociology, and public health (to name just a few fields), journals unread by most marketers.

This paper reports the results of a study which was recently published in a leading public health journal. These findings relate directly to the practice of marketing and, we believe, could form part of the bridge-building literature.

Literature Review

Alcohol is a major contributor to problems experienced by teenagers, including depression, suicidal ideation and behavior, decreased scholastic performance, aggression and violence, disrupted family and other social relationships, high-risk sexual activity, and delinquent behavior (Mainous 1996).
The messages in alcohol advertising have been shown to influence normative beliefs regarding the social acceptability of alcohol (Leiberman and Orlandi 1987), expectations of positive outcomes of consumption (Casswell and Zhang 1998), perceptions of alcohol drinkers as attractive and successful (Dorfman and Wallack 1996), and to encourage drinking by young people (Hastings, MacKintosh, and Aitken 1992; Wyllie, Zhang and Casswell 1998). Young people, at the time they are beginning to experiment with alcohol, are in the process of learning to establish relationships with peers and with the opposite sex (Strasburger 1993). Hence they could be especially vulnerable to inferences that consuming alcohol will enhance their social and sexual attractiveness. The Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) in theory recognises this vulnerability and bans such appeals, as well as appeals that promote positive mood effects as a result of alcohol consumption.

Regulation of alcohol advertising in Australia is based on a comparatively new voluntary system of self-regulation. Following the demise of the Advertising Standards Council in 1996, the major industry body, the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA), developed the Advertiser Code of Ethics (which applies to all forms of advertising), and established the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) and the Advertising Claims Board (ACB) to deal with complaints and breaches of the code. The AANA allowed the alcohol industry to separately develop its own code, the Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC), and its own complaints management system, the Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code Complaints Adjudication Panel. This Panel reports to the Alcoholic Beverages Advertising Code Management Committee, which is responsible for overseeing the ABAC.

Individuals who are unhappy with alcohol advertisements are able to lodge a formal complaint with the Advertising Standards Board, which passes the complaint on to the ABAC Complaints Adjudication Panel for determination if the complaint relates to the portrayal of alcohol consumption, or determines it internally if the complaint relates to discrimination or decency.

**Research Question**

It has been reported that complaints lodged with the ASB are almost always based on the complainant’s opinion and not backed by any objective evidence. The present study sought to provide objective evidence for a series of radio advertisements for a pre-mixed alcohol drink brand, advertisements which at face value appear to contravene the ABAC.

**Method**

Three advertisements were selected from a series of five radio advertisements for the UDL brand pre-mixed alcohol drinks. The selection of ads was based solely on opportunistic recording when the ads were broadcast. The ads were played on a Perth radio station (96FM) which has a predominantly younger audience: 41% of 10-17 year-old radio listeners and 32% of 18-25 year-old radio listeners (Media Monitors 1999). The ads were heard during both the breakfast show (6.00am to 10.00am) and the evening program (7.00pm to 10.00pm) during the month of April, 1999.

Each of the advertisements features a narrative where the “hero,” a young man or woman, faces a “problem” situation which causes, or is likely to cause, some form of emotional
distress if not solved satisfactorily. In each situation, a can of UDL is introduced, resulting in an “attitudinal” change (more assertive and self confident) on the part of the “hero” after consuming the drink and the situation being resolved by subsequent events. This is a classic problem-solution advertising format: although UDL is not presented explicitly as the solution, it is strongly implied to be. While the ads do not expressly state that consumption of the UDL leads to success or relaxation, the temporal inference is quite clear. Two of the ads make direct references to (perceived or expected) success with the opposite sex immediately following consumption of UDL, and all three ads present a situation where subsequent to consuming the alcohol, the characters are more relaxed and confident.

For example, one ad features a young woman who says: “I’m getting ready to go out and I ask my flatmate if my capri pants make my bum look too big, and she says: ‘are you saying that because my arse looks fat?’, and I say ‘no’ but she starts fretting and that sets me off so I go get a jumper to tie around my waist and I look in the mirror and wonder whether people are going to see that jumper and instantly assume I’m self conscious about the size of my butt, and while I’m tossing things up I sip on my can of UDL Vodka and Cranberry and think ‘if only the rest of my life was as uncomplicated as this drink, which says vodka and cranberry and delivers it without pedal pushing any unrealistic dietary messages,’ and as I finish that first UDL can of the night I decide I’m so over capri pants and change into a little black dress instead.”

A self-completion questionnaire was constructed. This was adapted from a research agency’s procedure, ADTEST©, which is based on standard, published advertising pre-test measures (Rossiter and Percy 1997). The ADTEST © procedure has been used extensively in pre-testing advertising for both commercial products and health and social issues (Donovan, Jalleh and Henley 1999; Donovan, Francas, Paterson and Zappelli 2000). Respondents were first asked the open-ended question: “Apart from telling you to drink UDL, what do you think was the single main message of the ad? What was the ad trying to tell you about UDL and the people who drink UDL?” Respondents were then presented with the statements in Table 2 and asked: “Can you remember which – if any – of these messages were in the ad?”

Respondents were recruited from two locations: a local high school in a medium-to-high SES area, and a university campus. In all cases, the survey was conducted in classrooms, with teachers’ consent, and respondents were invited to take part in a study on radio advertising. In both locations there were three concurrent classes, and classes were randomly allocated to one of the three UDL ads. After listening to the ad twice (after Krugman 1972), respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire. The high school sample consisted of year 11 students (15-16 years old); the university sample consisted of third-year students (19-21 years old).

Results

Unprompted message take-out

Thematic analyses of respondents’ answers to the open-ended message take-out question revealed six main themes: mood enhancement via removal of anxieties/problems; positive mood enhancement per se; social interaction enhancement; self-confidence enhancement; product characteristics; and user imagery. Examples of these are shown in Table 1.

- Mood enhancement via problem removal/solution was the most frequently mentioned message – e.g., “by drinking it, all your problems will go away and you’ve got nothing to worry about” (female, age 16).
- Positive mood enhancement per se – e.g., “People who drink have fun” (female, age 16).
- Enhanced self-confidence, primarily related to the boosting of low self-confidence rather than boosting self-confidence per se: for example, “Once you drink UDL, you won’t care about what you look like so you can wear anything which you feel self conscious in” (female, age 16).
- Social interaction enhancement had an opposite sex/relationships sub-theme as well as a general “popularity/social acceptance” sub theme – e.g., “Help you pull guys or chicks if you drink UDLs” (female, age 20+).
- Product characteristics were relatively infrequently mentioned, with the most common mention relating to the product being “… simple and easy to drink” (female, aged 16). This characteristic is important to young people, who find many alcoholic drinks “not easy” or “difficult” (to drink and to carry).
- User imagery (characteristics of UDL drinkers) appeared to be influenced by the fast delivery of the monologue, with both positive (e.g., “energetic”) and negative (e.g., “highly strung/hyper”) implications.

It is apparent that messages perceived from the ads include that drinking UDL (i.e., alcohol) will result in positive mood enhancement – primarily via the removal of problems/anxieties, and hence offers a therapeutic benefit as an aid to relaxation; will boost self-confidence; and will contribute to the achievement of social and opposite-sex relationship success.

Table 1: Unprompted perceived messages (percent of respondents)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>15-16 year olds (%)</th>
<th>19-21 year olds (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mood Enhancement via problem removal/solution</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive mood enhancement</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhanced self-confidence</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social interaction enhancement</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product characteristics</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of UDL drinkers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prompted message take-out

The results in Table 2 confirm and extend the unprompted message take-out findings with respect to mood change, opposite sex interactions, socializing and self-confidence. In both age groups, the most frequently-perceived prompted messages relate to UDL making the drinker: feel carefree; feel self-confident; feel less anxious in social situations; and have a good time.

However, the absolute percentages nominating these messages are vastly different for the two age groups, and statistically significant for most messages (see Table 2). With one exception (“make me the centre of attention”), the older age group was far more likely than the younger age group to agree that each of these messages is indicated in the ads. The more frequent nomination of messages by the older group may reflect their greater sophistication in decoding ad messages. Nevertheless, substantial proportions of the younger group perceived each of these messages in one or more of the ads, and the rank order of the perceived messages is generally similar for the two age groups.
Not all of these messages were relevant to all ads. It can be noted, therefore, that the figures in Table 2 understate the potential message take-out of the advertising campaign, given that each respondent listened to only one advertisement in the series in this study, but could be exposed to all three in the campaign.

**Table 2: Prompted perceived messages (percent of respondents)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message</th>
<th>15-16 year olds (n = 40)</th>
<th>19-21 year olds (n = 43)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make me feel carefree</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce my anxieties in a social situation</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>72*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me feel confident about myself</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>81***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me have a great time</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make me more sociable and outgoing</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>67***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make me the centre of attention</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me act cool</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me not worry about how I look</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>70***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help me be successful with the opposite sex</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>46**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make me less inhibited about approaching the opposite sex</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>51***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p, .01, ** p, .05, * p, .10

**Recommendations and Conclusions**

The results suggest that the targeting of these UDL ads may be outside the industry guidelines in that the ads are perceived by a substantial proportion of the sample as suggesting that consumption of alcohol can lead to a significant change in mood, has a therapeutic benefit in aiding relaxation, and can contribute to social and sexual success. Overall, then, although we are not in a position to comment on the advertiser-intended messages of the UDL ads, the messages perceived by (perhaps impressionable) young people are that drinking alcohol solves problems and contributes to relaxation, happiness and social/relationship success, and that these benefits can, and do, apply to people under the legal drinking age.

Although based on only small convenience samples, we see no serious bias in their selection and are confident that these perceived message results are generalisable to young people in these age groups. Of course, if we were measuring more specific brand attitude effects, larger sample could be necessary to provide greater confidence.

Under current Australian legislation, the alcohol industry has its own advertising code and its own complaints management system. This system includes a “pre-vetting” stage whereby ads are reviewed prior to being broadcast which should, in theory, prevent consumers being exposed to inappropriate ads. As with any such self-regulation, the question is often asked as to the effectiveness of this system in ensuring that advertisers comply with the regulations. Although based on only one advertising campaign, the results of this study suggest that the self-regulation system, especially at the pre-vetting stage, may not be functioning effectively and may require further examination.
References


Media Monitors (1999), Personal communication, Perth, WA.

