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## What does alcohol advertising tell young people about drinking?

### Abstract

Alcohol has long been known to be the cause of significant physical, emotional and social harm in our society. Given that the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcoholic products is big business all over the world, clearly the marketing, advertising and promotion of these products is essential. However, there is an ongoing debate regarding the relationship between advertising and alcohol consumption and, importantly, the influence of this advertising on harmful drinking patterns. To examine the potential influence of alcohol advertising on young people (both under and over the legal drinking age), a convenience sample of 287 young people recruited from a range of settings (including high school, university, TAFE and the workforce) were shown two advertisements (one print and one television), and asked whether they believed a range of messages were evident in each advertisement. We found that the majority of adolescents believe alcohol advertisements often include several messages which breach the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC), highlighting the ineffective nature of this self-regulatory scheme.

### Disciplines

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## **What does Alcohol Advertising tell Young People about Drinking?**

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### **Abstract**

Alcohol has long been known to be the cause of significant physical, emotional and social harm in our society. Given that the manufacture, distribution and sale of alcoholic products is big business all over the world, clearly the marketing, advertising and promotion of these products is essential. However, there is an ongoing debate regarding the relationship between advertising and alcohol consumption and, importantly, the influence of this advertising on harmful drinking patterns. To examine the potential influence of alcohol advertising on young people (both under and over the legal drinking age), a convenience sample of 287 young people recruited from a range of settings (including high school, university, TAFE and the workforce) were shown two advertisements (one print and one television), and asked whether they believed a range of messages were evident in each advertisement. We found that the majority of adolescents believe alcohol advertisements often include several messages which breach the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC), highlighting the ineffective nature of this self-regulatory scheme.

### **Introduction**

There is an ongoing debate, in the literature as well as in policy circles, as to the relationship between advertising and alcohol consumption. Some econometric studies have reported no association between advertising bans and alcohol consumption or abuse (e.g., Nelson, 2001), whereas others have argued that bans on alcohol advertising result in lower per capita alcohol consumption and lower alcohol-related vehicle fatality rates (e.g., Saffer, 1991).

Similarly, there is an ongoing debate as to whether alcohol advertising targets underage drinkers; with some arguing that the content of alcohol advertisements is often designed deliberately to appeal to those under the legal drinking age (e.g., Garfield *et al.*, 2003) and others that alcohol advertisements do not intentionally target underage drinkers (e.g. Slater *et al.*, 1996). Whether intended or not, there is increasing evidence that children and youth are exposed to, and recall, alcohol advertising (e.g., Collins *et al.*, 2007) and like alcohol advertising (e.g., Grube, 1993). Further, there is also increasing evidence of associations between liking ads and underage drinking (Austin and Nach-Ferguson, 1995); between exposure and alcohol expectancies (Grube, 1995; Lipsitz *et al.*, 1993); exposure and drinking intentions (Grube and Wallack, 1994; Kelly and Edwards, 1998); and even between exposure and current or future drinking (Wyllie *et al.*, 1998, Snyder *et al.*, 2006). However, the impact of alcohol advertising on young people goes beyond these direct associations between exposure and drinking behaviours. Other concerns voiced by policymakers, academics and community members include the effect of alcohol advertising on young people's perceptions of drinking and the normative behaviour (e.g., Jernigan, 2006); and the reinforcement of gender and racial stereotypes (e.g. Alaniz and Wilkes, 1998).

In 2005, the Australian Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing conducted a survey on consumer perceptions of alcohol advertising and the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code

(ABAC) with a random sample of 1000 Australian adults (King *et al.*, 2005). Key findings from this study included that 60% of respondents stated that alcohol advertising should be either more restricted or entirely prohibited; that 69% believed that alcohol advertising encourages underage people to drink alcohol; and that 52% believed that it encourages underage people to drink too much alcohol.

The purpose of the current study was to examine, using a series of advertisements that the authors perceived to be in breach of the ABAC Code, what the perceived messages were from the perspectives of young people (both above and below the legal drinking age).

## **Method**

From May 2004 until March 2005 television and magazine advertising campaigns (national and regional) were monitored for alcohol products. The television advertisements were monitored via a media monitoring service and the magazine advertisements were monitored by manually examining all issues of the top 20 selling magazines in Australia. A research assistant collated all advertisements and commercials and prepared a monthly summary for the Chief Investigators (CIs) comprising those which potentially breached the codes of the ABAC and the ASB. The three CIs independently reviewed these summaries and 13 advertisements were considered in breach of the codes, including seven television commercials and six magazine advertisements. These advertisements were the stimuli for the present study.

A convenience sample of 287 young people aged 15-24 was recruited: 110 secondary school students aged 15-17 years from secondary schools in the Melbourne metropolitan area; 143 tertiary students aged 18-24 years from three tertiary education campuses (110 from two university campuses and 33 from a TAFE); and 34 employed young people aged 18-24 years from a variety of “white collar” and “blue-collar” workplaces. Just under one third (30.2%) of the respondents were male and 68.2% were female (gender was not reported for the remaining 1.6%). The mean age of respondents was 18.9 years (range 15 to 24), with 37.2% under the legal drinking age of 18. Each participant was provided with an information sheet that introduced the project, explained the rights of participants and gave contact details of services that could provide counselling if required. Each respondent independently completed two questionnaires, one for a print advertisement and one for a TV advertisement, under supervision of project staff. In total, 572 completed surveys were returned, from a total sample of 287 respondents.

## **Results**

### **Perceived Messages in the Advertisements**

There were some strong indications that respondents see several social benefits of consuming alcohol in general. As shown in Table 1, 74% of responses indicated that the advertisement contained the message that drinking the advertised product would make them more sociable and outgoing; 89.9% that the advertisement suggested that the product would help them have a great time; 69.8% that it would help them fit in; 64.9% that it would help them feel more confident; 58.9% that it would help them feel less nervous; 46.5% it would help them succeed with the opposite sex; and 42% that it would make them feel more attractive.

In general, there were no significant differences between males and females in response to this series of questions, however females (67.9%) were more likely than males (58.4%) to believe that drinking the product would make them feel more confident ( $\chi^2=4.8$ ;  $p=0.028$ ). There were no significant differences between those over and under the age of 18 for any of the social benefit-related questions, with the exception of the perception that the product will help them have a great time. Underage drinkers were more likely to report believing that consuming the product they saw advertised would have this outcome than those over the age of 18 (93.4% compared to 87.7%:  $\chi^2=4.6$ ;  $p=0.032$ ).

**Table 1: Perceived Messages about Social Outcomes of Product Consumption**

	Yes (%)	No (%)
Drinking Product will make me more sociable and outgoing	74.0	26.0
Drinking Product will help me have a great time	89.9	10.1
Drinking Product will help me succeed with opposite sex	46.5	53.5
Drinking Product will help me feel more confident	64.9	35.1
Drinking product will help me feel more attractive	42.0	58.0
Drinking Product will help me feel less nervous	58.9	41.1
Drinking Product will help me fit in	69.8	30.3

As shown in Table 2, for all but two of the advertisements over two thirds of the participants believed that the advertisements suggested that consuming the product would make them more sociable and outgoing, with the exceptions being VB “sport” (27.3%) and Carlton Midstrength “funeral” (52.6%). Both of these advertisements show the actors (all males) behaving in ways that may be perceived to be socially inappropriate; in the former case sitting on a sofa drinking beer and watching women doing aerobics on television (which could be perceived as sexist and also lacks the social interaction usually associated with alcohol consumption), the latter running out of a funeral with the casket to rush to the pub.

Across all of the advertisements, over two thirds of the participants perceived that the advertisements suggested that consuming the product would help them have a great time, with over 90% of participants agreeing for eight of the 13 advertisements and over 80% for an additional four. There was a dichotomy in relation to the advertisements perceived to be depicting that consumption of the product would help them succeed with the opposite sex. Over two thirds of respondents replied in the affirmative for five of the advertisements (St Agnes brandy, 95.8%; Kahlua, 85.7%; Frangelico “suits me”, 80.0%; Tiger beer, 78.0%; James Boags, 74.0%). Conversely, there were six advertisements for which less than one third believe this to be the case (VB “sport”, 27.3%; Frangelico “make it a habit”, 25.0%; VB “kebab”, 19.6%; Carlton Midstrength “funeral”, 15.8%; Tooheys New “cane toads”, 8.2%; and Carlton Midstrength “removalist”, 0.0%).

There was a consistent perception across all but two of the advertisements that the advertisement suggested that consumption of the product would help them feel more confident, with the exceptions being VB “sport”, VB “kebab”, and Carlton Midstrength “funeral”. This message was most evident in the two explicitly sexual advertisements, St Agnes brandy (89.6%) and Frangelico “suits me” (82.9%).

**Table 2: Social Outcomes by Advertisement**

	n	make more sociable and outgoing (%)	help have a great time (%)	help succeed with opp sex (%)	help feel more confident (%)	help feel more attractive (%)	help feel less nervous (%)	help me fit in (%)
Galliano	40	82.5	92.5	37.5	65.0	50.0	67.5	75.0
Frangelico (Habit)	36	86.1	86.1	25.0	66.7	52.8	50.0	66.7
Kahlua	35	82.9	94.3	85.7	65.7	71.4	54.3	71.4
St Agnes	48	81.3	83.3	95.8	89.6	79.2	77.1	57.4
XXXX	51	86.3	98.0	56.9	74.5	43.1	62.7	80.4
VB (Sport)	44	27.3	81.8	27.3	34.1	9.1	36.4	61.4
VB (Kebab)	51	72.5	92.2	19.6	49.0	17.6	56.9	78.4
Carlton (Removal)	53	72.7	90.9	0.0	60.6	0.0	42.4	66.7
Carlton (Funeral)	38	52.6	86.8	15.8	42.1	13.2	60.5	68.4
Tiger Beer	50	90.0	96.0	78.0	70.0	64.0	62.0	80.0
Tooheys	61	72.1	91.8	8.2	63.9	8.2	63.9	62.3
James Boags	50	82.0	96.0	74.0	76.0	60.0	68.0	74.0
Frangelico (Suits Me)	35	68.6	71.4	80.0	82.9	88.6	51.4	62.9

The dichotomy in relation to the perception that the advertisement suggested consumption of the product would help succeed with the opposite sex was also evident in responses to whether the advertisement suggested the product would help make an individual feel more attractive. Those advertisements which used overt or implicit sexual appeals received a higher proportion of affirmative responses; Frangelico “suits me” (88.6%), St Agnes Brandy (79.2%), Kahlua (71.4%), Tiger beer (64.0%), and James Boag (60.0%). Those which showed offensive or non-interactive behaviour received a very low positive response; Carlton Midstrength “funeral” (13.2%), VB “sports” (9.1%), Tooheys New “cane toad” (8.2%), Carlton “removalist” (0.0%).

The perception that the advertisement conveyed the message that “drinking this product helps me feel less nervous” was reported by over half of the respondents for all ads except for Frangelico “make it a habit” (50.0%), Carlton Midstrength “funeral” (42.4%), with the highest proportion of affirmative responses again in response to advertisements containing sexual appeals. Similarly, over 60% of respondents perceived that the advertisement conveyed the message that “drinking this product helps me feel less nervous” for all of the advertisements tested.

## Discussion

Results regarding the clearly demonstrated perceived social outcomes of consumption of the alcoholic products (see Table 1) are of particular importance. It must be noted that respondents did not necessarily *believe* that consuming the product would lead to such social benefits, but rather (in most cases) the majority believed that the advertisement *contained messages* which inferred that such social benefits are likely. However, this is a very concerning finding, given that the ABAC states that alcohol advertisements must not suggest that consumption or presence of alcohol may create or contribute to a significant change in

mood or environment. The ABAC also prohibits presenting the consumption or presence of alcoholic beverages as a cause of, or contributor to, the achievement of personal, business, social, sporting, sexual or other success. The lack of significant differences for most categories between males and females, and underage and legally-aged drinkers, indicates that this perception regarding advertisement content is consistent across the entire range of young consumers.

In one interesting exception to the consistent responses from legally aged and under-aged drinkers, there is evidence that, potentially, an underlying belief amongst youths is developed (even before they can legally consume alcohol) that alcohol is required to have a good time. This association between alcohol consumption and having fun was again confirmed with over 80% of respondents stating that the advertisement implied this for all but one of the 13 advertisements. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, one of six clear indicators of having a drinking problem is, “believing that alcohol is necessary to have fun”. Since 90% of this sample believed that the advertisement they saw conveyed such a message, there is clearly a problem with existing regulation of alcohol advertising, as there are advertisements out there which are encouraging a belief which is at the root of the societal ‘drinking problem’.

This study has also provided a preliminary indication that, compared to other types of alcohol, advertising for beer (particularly less expensive brands) is perceived to be less suggestive of increasing success with the opposite sex. Only one of the six advertisements for which less than one-third stated that consumption would help them succeed with the opposite sex was not an advertisement for beer (Frangelico), and only two of the advertisements for which more than two-thirds held this belief were for beer – and both of these (Tiger Beer and James Boags) are more expensive than ‘bottom-shelf’ brands such as VB, Carlton and Tooheys. This distinction was also evident for advertising suggesting increased attractiveness, with Tiger Beer and James Boags again the only two beers for which the majority believed that consumption would make them feel more attractive. Since spirits and liqueurs are more expensive in Australia, they may therefore be associated with being more upper class, even amongst adolescents and young adults. These findings potentially reveal that consumption of such products reinforces this increased status and reflect Australia’s cultural values in regards to social class and beverage preference.

These findings alone clearly demonstrate the disparity between young people’s beliefs and perceptions regarding messages contained in alcohol advertisements, and the ABAC. Given the magnitude and variety of physical, emotional and social harm that has been found to result from alcohol consumption, the cultural importance of alcohol in Australia must be addressed.

There is no doubt that the media has an immense influence on our society, the way we think, and the things we do – and this is particularly true of young people. Therefore, it is crucial that there is an appropriate and effective way of moderating and controlling exposure to alcohol via advertisements. Regulating alcohol promotion is also recognised by the National Drug Research Institute in a list of seven interventions which attract a high degree of consensus for having merit. This research has shown that the overwhelming majority of adolescents believe that alcohol advertisements often include several inferences which breach the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code, indicating the ineffective nature of this self-regulating advertising scheme, and the subsequent need either for it to be more strongly enforced, or for the establishment of a statutory regulatory system.

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