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Disciplines

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Awareness of Alcohol Advertising Among Children Who Watch Televised Sports

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Abstract

Are children being adversely affected by advertising directed at adult consumers? Is it socially responsible to advertise alcohol during programs with a young viewing audience? One potential area requiring consideration is the potential impact of alcohol advertising and promotion during sporting broadcasts on the alcohol beliefs of children in Australia. In this paper, the frequent alcohol advertising during the finals of the One Day Cricket Series broadcast during the summer of 2006 was found to contain features potentially appealing to young children. Qualitative data collected during friendship pair discussions with Grade five and six primary school students found that children have high levels of recognition for alcohol ads shown during the TV broadcasts and highlights the appeal of certain features such as humor and mascots – as well as a tendency for children to associate a preference for alcohol products with being young, male, sporty and humorous.

Introduction

One of the most commonly raised issues among those concerned about the alcohol consumption of young people is the close association between alcohol and sport. Sponsorship of sporting events by the alcohol industry is common practice in Australia, and there is currently much debate among government, industry groups and public health advocates about whether associating alcohol with sport is inappropriate because of the potential impact on underage consumers (Howard and Crompton, 1995). From studies in the US, we know that children are high viewers of sporting programs, and that young people have their greatest exposure to alcohol advertising and promotion through televised sports (Grube, 1993).

According to alcohol companies their ads are directed at the adult population and are aimed at promoting brand loyalty, not increasing demand (Zwarun and Farrar, 2005). However, the presence of particular features in advertising has been shown to make particular ads more attractive and appealing to young people. For example, Waiters, Treno and Grube (2001) found the use of appealing role models (celebrity product endorsements) increased recall and likeability of alcohol ads among young people, along with other features including humor, the use of cute, creative and funny animation or animals and the use of youth-oriented music.

There is ongoing debate as to whether there is a direct association between alcohol advertising and young people's drinking. However, it appears that alcohol advertisements may increase both the desire to drink and positive expectancies about alcohol consumption. This is especially clear from consumer studies, where a more complex set of factors has been measured, including not just exposure to advertising, but also affective and informational processing components such as attention and appeal (Hastings et al, 2005). In a study with 12-19 year olds, Unger et al (2003) found evidence of an association between alcohol advertising exposure, likeability for alcohol advertisements, the ability to recall alcohol advertisements and media receptivity. Alcohol advertisements have also been found to influence the drinking

expectancies of young people. Exposure to ads has been shown to produce optimistic beliefs about alcohol (Grube and Wallack, 1994) and to associate drinking with positive personal attributes, such as increased sociability, sophistication and physical attractiveness and positive outcomes such as success, relaxation, romance and adventures (Grube, 1993).

The strength of the association between alcohol and sports in Australia prompts consideration of the potential for children who watch sport on TV to be exposed to a considerable amount of alcohol advertising, and thus learn to associate alcohol with sport. Indeed, the potential impact of the “branding” of sport by alcohol marketers, could create powerful emotional associations between the physical product, the sport and the “sporting heroes” who (due to the complex nature of sponsorship) are required to wear the branded merchandise of the alcohol sponsor and to feature in the associated commercials. In Australia, there have been no studies investigating the potential appeal or influence of the associated advertisements on the alcohol beliefs of young people.

Aims of this Study

This paper describes results from a recent pilot study conducted in Australia to begin to explore the nature of alcohol advertising shown during sporting broadcasts, and the potential spillover effects in relation to the alcohol beliefs of children. Specifically, the study quantified the alcohol advertising associated with a sporting broadcast in Australia (i.e. One Day Cricket) and explored the associated brand recognition, likeability and alcohol beliefs of Grade Five and Grade Six primary school children utilising ads shown during the broadcasts as stimulus materials.

Methodology

The public television broadcast of the three One Day Cricket finals between Australia and Sri Lanka during the months of January and February of 2006 was recorded onto DVD. A frequency and content analysis was conducted on the advertisements shown during the broadcast. Ads were coded for frequency by product type and for features that have previously been identified in the literature as appealing to children (e.g. Waiters, Treno and Grube, 2001) including modeling, mascots and humor.

A qualitative study was then conducted utilizing six friendship-pair discussions with grade five and six students from two public primary schools in the Illawarra region of NSW (6 boys and 6 girls) to explore brand recognition and likeability of alcohol advertisements that appeared on public broadcast television during these finals. Year 5 and 6 students were selected for study as research has shown that children have well developed beliefs about alcohol and its effects before they have a personal experience of drinking (Christiansen et al, 1985). Friendship pairs (also known as dyads) involve interviewing two friends at the same time (the children nominate another person they are good friends with to be interviewed together). Friendship pairs are often used by commercial market researchers when young respondents are shy or don't seem capable of speaking to directly or comfortably (Milward Brown, 2004). The format allows questions to be redirected so that the children talk to each other. Friendship pairs also avoid some of the limitations of focus groups which may be 'led' by the strongest children, with the others agreeing with the leaders (Highet, 2003). A discussion guide and various games and stimulus activities were utilized to discuss the ads, and explore the place of sport and sports watching in the children's lives. Objectives included

establishing brand recognition and appeal of the ads, with a particular focus on the appeal of alcohol advertisements. Questions were included to explore whether the children find the alcohol advertisements appealing. Television surveys were also completed by parents of children to examine viewing habits, particularly sports watching.

Children were also shown photos of three adult male cricket celebrities and three non-sporting adult male celebrities and stills of product advertisements, and asked to match the various celebrities with what they thought would be the celebrity's favorite three products. The different product advertisements were drawn from a sample identified as being products that would appeal to the adult male demographic (e.g. cars, razors, aftershave etc) that had been advertised during sports programming and other prime time television in the previous month. There was the same number of advertisements for alcohol products as for non-alcohol products. The purpose of this exercise was to identify if the children are more likely to associate the sporting celebrity with alcohol products rather than the non-sporting celebrities.

Results

Frequency and Potential Appeal of Alcohol Ads

Our analysis of advertising during the TV broadcast of the 2006 One Day Cricket finals (Phillipson and Jones, 2006) revealed that alcohol was the fourth most frequently advertised product (after entertainment, cars and services), both by number of advertisements and total advertising time. In total, there were 23 minutes and 43 seconds of alcohol advertising during the finals, equating to 10.0% of all advertising. Content analysis showed that some features found appealing to young people in previous studies were also present in alcohol advertising shown during the free-to-air cricket broadcast in Australia including use of humor (in nine out of 10 ads) and use of human models (including sporting celebrities) in eight out of 10 alcohol ads shown.

Exposure, Appeal and Recognition of Alcohol Ads

Discussions highlighted the significant role of sport in the lives of children. Playing sport for the children was associated with positive life outcomes such as good health, success and maintaining a healthy weight. However, TV viewing was highly variable both in the amount of televised sport they watched (e.g. from zero to nine hours on a typical weekend, and from zero to nine TV sports programs watched regularly). The sample size however was too small to allow any examination of an association between TV sports watching and likeability or recognition of alcohol ads. Responses however indicated that for some children, watching sport on the TV was a regular part of life, especially for boys, and included a wide variety of sports such as rugby, AFL, soccer and cricket. Most of the children were able to name favorite teams and players; about half were able to identify the sponsors of those teams, and many of the children owned merchandise from their favorite teams. With the exception of two participants (both female), all children were able to name the sponsors of the Australian Cricket Team (VB and Bundaberg Rum).

During the interviews, children were shown stills from ads broadcast during the one day series of the cricket during summer of 2006. There was considerable variation in their recall and recognition of ads, which appeared to vary on the basis of both the appeal of

the product and the appeal of the actual ad. For example, the children consistently recognized both the VB and the Bundaberg rum ads which had been part of the summer promotions during the cricket broadcast. They were able to name the brand (VB/Bundy) and the product (beer/alcohol), and were quick to point out that the ads were appealing because of features such as humor the use of mascots:

“...it makes you laugh at the start. You always want to stay and watch the end of it to see what happens” [Female, Group Two] and
“I like it because it’s got the pink polar bear in it” [Female, Group Two]

Some features in advertising were described as appealing, regardless of the product. For example, the use of humor or music:

“A lot of the ads are hilarious on TV they like attract attention and so like people will buy them or something like that” [Female, Group Three] and
“My dad drinks VB. So it’s funny... and I like you know the music part” [Female, Group Two]

The importance of appeal was again demonstrated by children reporting that they do not pay attention to ads unless they hold their interest:

I: *....if that ad came on the Tele ... do you think you would pay attention to it?*
“Yeah because it’s funny” [Male, Group One]
I: *Do you watch all of the ads or ...*
“Sometimes we change it. If there’s something else more interesting, we change it during the ad” [Male, Group One]

Without the presence of other appealing features, the use of celebrities in advertisements alone may not be sufficient to make an ad appealing. For example during discussions in one male group, they denied that ads were appealing just because they contained sports players. Rather, the ad itself had to contain other features to engage them. For example, when discussing the Johnny Walker ad which features the Australian cricket player Justin Langer:

I: *So does it matter that the cricket players were in it? That doesn’t make it interesting enough?*
“No. It’s pretty boring” [Male, Group One]

Product preference was often linked to endorsement. Children were invited to participate in a game where they matched well known adult male celebrities with their favorite products. When matching celebrities to their “favorite” products, children often attributed the preferences of celebrities on the basis of products they were known to endorse. For example, Brett Lee and Weetbix:

I: *If you thought he [Brett Lee] was going to buy three different things, what three things would he most want?*
“Weetbix of course” [Male, Group One] and
“Ok – I think Weetbix because he’s like sponsored by them ...he’s on the ads and everything...and then I think VB – or I think Johnny Walker” [Female, Group Two]

Others linked product preference, such as for alcohol, to characteristics of the person, such as gender or a person’s age or to being humorous:

I: *Why did you think he liked....VB and Johnny Walker?*
“Because he’s a man” [Female, Group Two] and

“And ... and ... his wife would probably drink wine” [Female, Group Two] and
*“Like he’s [Brett Lee] still....sort of like a teenager.... So he won’t be drinking like
say – milk and other stuff he would be drinking....like wine and beers and other
stuff”* [Female, Group 3]
“The funny guy.....Drinks all the alcohol” [Male, Group 1]

Product preference was also linked to being a sports player:

*“I said Weetbix because he’s um, a cricket player and I assume he just likes
Weetbix. Pura milk because it’s healthy...”* [Female, Group Two] and
*“That’s a very good one [VB] because most men drinkEspecially like when they
play sports, and yeah and when their tired from sports they might go and then
have a drink and stuff”* [Male, Group Four]

Discussion

An audit of advertising during the finals of the One Day Cricket during the summer of 2006 reveals a high frequency of alcohol advertisements, dominated by the products of the alcohol sponsors. Significantly, the alcohol advertisements shown during the cricket broadcasts showed an overwhelming use of human model and humor, both of which have been shown to be appealing to a younger audience.

The friendship pair data revealed a high awareness amongst the grade five and six children for the alcohol products and brands advertised during the cricket broadcast. Interviews confirmed that ads containing features previously identified in the literature such as humor, music and mascots were particularly appealing to children. Children were aware of celebrity endorsement of products and, in some cases, associated the preference for products of the celebrities with products they had endorsed. Of particular note was the association of particular products with personal characteristics. Alcohol was identified as a product preferred by males, young people and people who were humorous and men who play sport. Given cricket celebrities are young males, it is possible that the association between being, male and young and preferring alcohol, is also strengthened by the alcohol sponsorship of sport. The fact that there were some advertisements that the children did not recall, or did not find appealing (such as Johnny Walker) suggests that it may be possible to develop adult-targeted ads that do *not* appeal to children. Marketers should pay particular attention to the use of appeals and messages that are attractive to young people – not only to demonstrate their commitment to corporate social responsibility (i.e., to contribute to reducing alcohol-related harms), but also to reduce the likelihood of government restrictions on alcohol advertising that are likely to occur if the industry does not demonstrate a capacity to self-regulate effectively.

Although only a small pilot study, both the frequency and content analysis of alcohol ads shown during the cricket broadcast and the appeal of those ads to the young children interviewed prompts the need for further investigation into the alcohol sponsorship of sport and the impact on children’s alcohol beliefs and expectancies. This is particularly so in light of the central place of sport in the Australian culture, and the increasing levels of underage and binge drinking amongst our young people. Recruitment of a larger sample would enable comparison of brand recognition and

appeal of alcohol ads between sports viewers and non-sports viewers, as well as an exploration of differences that may exist between males and females.

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