

# Literature Review

## Alcohol Marketing on Social Media

The impact of alcohol marketing via social media on young people

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### Abstract

This review discusses the volume and content of alcohol marketing via social media and the impact it has on young people. The main goal is to describe the amount of alcohol marketing young people are exposed to on social media as well as how alcohol brands use social media platforms and user generated content to promote alcohol consumption. The results show that volume and content of alcohol marketing differ between studies and that user generated content forms a not to be underestimated part.

The literature review finds that alcohol marketing uses messages containing humor, indications of social success, and associations with events to attract users and promote their brands and that only a few regulations are in place for social media. These regulations are found to be difficult to adhere to and ineffective in protecting young people. From this literature review, it is possible to conclude that alcohol marketing via social media represents a relatively new phenomena and that the impact of it on the drinking behavior of young people has to be taken very serious. Effective regulations to reduce the impact of alcohol marketing via social media seems a natural step given the growing user base of such platforms.

### Introduction

Exposure to alcohol marketing has been shown to be associated with more positive attitudes towards alcohol, earlier onset of alcohol consumption, and increased alcohol consumption. For a review, see Anderson et al 2009. Adolescents are shown to be especially susceptible to alcohol marketing and the related risks of alcohol consumption. In most Western countries, between 50 and 90 % of all young people have tried alcohol before the legal drinking age (Eurocare, 2014).

The alcohol industry has indicated that their marketing activities do not increase the consumption of alcohol (Spirits Europe 2012, Brewers Association of Australia & New Zealand, 2015)). This in spite of the scientific evidence that exists showing that increases in alcohol advertising leads to increases in alcohol consumption, especially amongst young people (Smith & Foxcroft, 2009; De Bruijn et al, 2016). The longitudinal study of de Bruijn on the relationship between adolescents' alcohol marketing exposure and alcohol use shows long-term effects (6 and 12 months later) of alcohol marketing on alcohol consumption and binge drinking. These results are one-directional, meaning that exposure of alcohol marketing caused changes in drinking patterns and not vice versa (De Bruijn et al., 2016). Other studies further confirm similar undesirable effects of alcohol marketing by showing that alcohol marketing leads to more positive attitudes towards alcohol consumption (e.g. Gordon, MacKintosh, & Moodie, 2010; Morgenstern, Isensee, Sargent, & Hanewinkel, 2011).

Marketing is defined as "any form of commercial communication or message that is designed to increase, or has the effect of increasing, the recognition, appeal and/or consumption of particular products and services. It could comprise anything that acts to advertise or otherwise promote a product or service" (WHO, 2010, p. 15). A recent development in marketing is the increased use of social media. Social media are social networking sites, apps or games that are interactive and allow communication between users (Moreno, D'Angelo, & Whitehill, 2016). Social media is increasingly popular and imbedded in everyday life. Especially teenagers spend a large amount of time on social media (Barry, Johnson, Rabre et al., 2015). Of all 13-year olds and older, at least 71% uses Facebook, the most popular social media platform with over a 1,870 million active users,

and a majority of them uses more than one social networking site (Lenhart, 2015). Social media provides the alcohol industry with new, appealing opportunities for marketing, resulting in an increased exposure risk of alcohol marketing for young people. Research shows that the average reach of social media is about 44% of 6-14 years old and 90% of 15-24 years old (Winpenny et al., 2012). A longitudinal study in Europe showed that of 9000 participating adolescents, more than a third had used a social network profile page containing an alcohol brand or logo (De Bruijn et al., 2016). Furthermore, the association with an increased frequency of high episodic drinking is stronger with marketing via social media than with marketing via traditional media (Critchlow, Moodie, Bauld, Bonner, & Hastings, 2015).

The environment of social networking sites provides the alcohol industry with cheap, attractive and seemingly endless options to advertise. One major beer brand, Heineken US, already spends 25% of the total advertising budget on digital media (PR Newswire, 2015). This is striking, since the overall marketing budget spent on digital media by the alcohol industry in 2011 was 7, 9%, and only 2% in 2008 (Bachman, 2014). These figures show the increased interest of the alcohol industry in using this new marketing platform. The interactive, constantly renewing, multi-directed character of social media makes it more and more attractive for both users and the alcohol marketing industry. This is alarming considering that research shows that the amount of alcohol marketing on social media is increasing (Moreno et al., 2016; Noel, Lazzarini, Robaina, & Vendrame, 2016; Winpenny, Marteau, & Nolte, 2014). However, research on social media marketing remains in a developmental stage.

While there is wide-spread use of statutory regulations of alcohol marketing in traditional media (i.e. television, radio, magazines and billboards), only a handful of countries have statutory regulation restricting alcohol marketing through social networking sites. That is distressing given the fact that young people make up a large part of the active

audience on social media (Lenhart, 2015) and are especially vulnerable to the negative consequences of alcohol marketing (Moreno et al., 2016). Self-regulation by the alcohol industry is in place in many countries but evidence suggests that these self-regulations are not effective in protecting young people from exposure to alcohol marketing. This because they are not comprehensive and often violated (Lobstein, Landon, Thornton, & Jernigan, 2016; Noel, Babor, & Robaina, 2016; Noel et al., 2016). Furthermore, policies from the social media platforms themselves, i.e. age restrictions to access, follow, or interact with alcohol brands on social media, are shown to not be effective due to a lack of consistency (Barry et al., 2016; Winpenny et al., 2014).

### **Current study**

Considering the technological developments within the field of advertising on social media, this study examines recent research that focuses on alcohol marketing via social media. The purpose of this study is to map the existing knowledge about alcohol marketing via social media. The research question that thereby follows is 'What effect does alcohol marketing via social media have on young people?'

By conducting this literature research, we hope to gain a better understanding of what alcohol marketing via social media contains, what the associated risks are (especially for young people), and whether it is necessary to thoroughly (re-)examine regulations and make sure they are adhered to. An overview of knowledge regarding alcohol marketing via social media will then, hopefully, lead to effective regulations by policymakers and reduced risks.

### **Method**

For this literature review a systematic search was done for the concepts alcohol marketing and social media, see Appendix 1 for a description. A total of 16 studies that focus on the combined subject of alcohol marketing and social media were found eligible for inclusion in this review. Several other studies with a wider

scope are added to elucidate and/or amplify the described results.

## Findings

### III.1 Extent of exposure to alcohol marketing via social media

#### *Alcohol brand marketing*

Only some social media platforms operate with age-gates to prevent underage users to follow official alcohol brand pages, but even then, it does not prevent underage users from viewing these pages and interacting with the brands (Barry et al., 2016). When there is no age-gate in place, all users, including minors, receive close to 4000 advertisement messages from alcohol brands within 30 days and over ten messages each day (Barry et al., 2016). According to a British study, alcohol brands on average post four advertisements each day (Atkinson, Ross-Houle, Begley, & Sumnall, 2017). According to a study by Critchlow et al., 2015, only 65% of 18-25 year olds surveyed were aware of alcohol marketing when using social media and those who reported to be the most aware, also reported weekly high episodic drinking. Alcohol marketing through social media had a stronger association with high episodic drinking than through traditional media. This is very likely due to the interactive and participating character of social media which makes users more involved.

Of the respondents in another study, 14% reported actually clicking on advertisements for alcohol, however, almost 50% reported watching alcohol advertising even though they were not explicitly looking for it (Hoffman, Weintraub, Austin, Pinkleton, & Austin, 2016). A study by Jones, Robinson, Barrie, Francis, & Lee (2016) showed that in only one week, already more than 16% of the respondents reported seeing alcohol marketing on social media, without even watching alcohol related posts. Up to 21% of the respondents reported that they did visit an alcohol page, of which half were minors (Jones et al., 2016). Apart from official alcohol brands' social media pages, there are related pages and groups that promote the brand and add to the extent of

alcohol marketing. Research by Winpenny and colleagues (2012) shows an average of 32 alcohol related social media pages.

#### *User generated marketing*

Besides content on social networking sites published by alcohol brands, there is also user generated content. Next to alcohol marketing provided by alcohol brands and non-official pages, a study of Jones showed that almost 31% of the respondents reported uploading and 'tagging' photos with an alcohol product in it, and almost 18% reported liking posts by an alcohol brand (Jones et al., 2016).

User generated content refers to the social media activity of private users and how they pick up on alcohol advertisements (e.g. liking, sharing, commenting, retweeting) and the content they provide themselves. Next to the broader, common form of marketing by the alcohol brands, users provide extra marketing by spreading the advertisements and enlarging the frequency of appearance of a brand name. This goes from liking or following an alcohol brands' page, reacting to products or deals offered by a brand, to talking about different subjects that are still related to the brand or inspired by the brand. Even when users do not follow or interact with an alcohol brand page, it still shows up when using the social media platforms because friends in their network might follow or interact with the brand (Barry et al., 2016; Niland et al., 2016).

An Australian study that analyzed the top 20 alcohol brands found them to have a combined and growing fan-base of two and a half million social media users (Carah, Brodmerkel, & Hernandez, 2014). The numbers of likes, views, followers and interactions with official pages differ per brand and social media platforms. However, it can be up to 21,000 for likes, and 12 million for all interactions of an official alcohol brands' Facebook page (Atkinson et al., 2017), and almost 10 million views for an official alcohol brands' YouTube video (Winpenny et al., 2014). In 30 days, five official alcohol brands' pages showed a total increase of more than 360,000 visitors on Facebook and almost 6000 on Twitter (Atkinson et al., 2017).

There are also non-official social media pages that contribute to the extent of alcohol marketing, though not directed by the alcohol industry. Research demonstrates that adolescents are less likely than young adults to engage with alcohol brands on social media, yet still up to 25% of users follow some alcohol marketing page (Carrotte, Dietze, Wright, & Lim, 2016). Furthermore, studies present the association between being engaged with any alcohol marketing page and more risky alcohol consumption (Carrotte et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2016). Hoffman et al., 2016 show that almost 15% of users does engage with alcohol marketing in some way and are able to confirm the association between alcohol marketing via social media and alcohol consumption: “Alcohol-related social media use directly predicted both binge drinking and problem drinking” (Hoffman et al., 2016, p. 5). Although it seems that the frequency by which alcohol brands post advertisements decreases, the amount of interaction between the brand and users on the page increases (Carah et al., 2014). This suggests that alcohol marketing through social media is turning more towards its users. Considering the quick and widespread character of social media and especially user generated content, this is an alarming fact.

Youth recalled greater exposure to advertising by alcohol brands in a survey than adults (Jernigan, Padon, Ross, & Borzekowski, 2017). Almost 30% surveyed minors recalled seeing alcohol advertisement on the Internet, versus almost 17% of the adult respondents. A similar recall gap was found with alcohol related content online, like pictures of celebrities using alcohol or wearing items with an alcohol logo (Jernigan et al., 2017).

Finally: the figures discussed here, are in some cases already several years old. It is most likely that the extent of alcohol marketing and especially user generated content has increased rapidly since then (Jernigan & Rushman, 2014).

### **III.2 Content of alcohol marketing via social media**

#### **Alcohol brand marketing**

Most studies that address the content of alcohol marketing have a qualitative approach and use a method referred to as netnography, which is the online approach of ethnography. Netnography is a method to study the social web of cultures, communities and interactions over the Internet (Mart, Mergendoller, & Simon, 2009). Research by Purves, Stead, and Eadie (2014) found that alcohol brands use social media for different kinds of action: advertising, soliciting feedback, start a conversation with users and encourage users to act by liking, commenting, retweeting. The type of actions that brands employ are all carefully designed to reinforce the values and identity of the brand. The tone of voice, selection of words and images, and cultural references are all very well thought through (Purves et al., 2014). According to an online survey, the message that is most perceived by social media users was that the alcohol brands are associated with success, specifically social success (Weaver et al., 2016). They imply drinking their brand will ensure you a good social status. Alcohol brands try to create this association with success by using cultural factors and situations in their advertising, for instance friends, beautiful women or sports. This includes depicting drinker prototypes, celebrities, and lots of humor (Atkinson et al., 2017). Within the survey the respondents most agreed upon the following messages of alcohol advertisements: 1) feel more relaxed, 2) improve your mood, 3) make you feel more social and outgoing and 4) feel more confident about yourself (Weaver et al., 2016). Alcohol brands try to appeal to social status and individual aspirations of users, the brands and brands’ posts are important for identity formation and peer acceptance (Purves et al., 2014). Although users see drunkenness as a bad thing, they associate drinking with having a good time (Hartigan & Coe, 2012).

Alcohol brands also associate themselves with specific organizations and events, which contribute to their identity (e.g. Purves et al.,

2014). By this, they try to strengthen their brand, whilst reaching more users and enhance their interaction with them. Also, alcohol consumption is often incorporated in images of events, because alcohol, more specifically the alcohol brand, is “part of the territory of social happenings” (Carah et al., 2014, p. 271). Alcohol brands also attract users by offering competitions in which they can win appealing prizes, like free tickets to an event (Weaver, Wright, Dietze, & Lim, 2016). Research by Nicholls (2012) focused on so-called real-world tie-ins; an actual branded event promoted wholly or in part via social media, like sponsored events, interactive games, competitions and giveaways, and invitations to drink. Events like this allow alcohol brands to not only market their product, but attract more users through the event itself, after which it is easier to contact them via social media and stimulate user generated content. When users upload photos linked to the event and the alcohol brand the line between official brand promotion and user generated content gets blurred, this helps to reinforce the brand identity by promoting the sponsored event and depicting the brand as intrinsic to the success of the event (Nicholls, 2012). These real-world tie-ins are beneficial for the alcohol brand because attendance of users provides marketing material for the social media platform of the alcohol brand. Instead of just using the social media platform to promote attendance, the goal is to encourage users’ engagement with and activity on the platform (Nicholls, 2012). These competitions, along with content about everyday life and cultural pastime are the two most used activities by brands on social media (Carah et al., 2014). They use it to prompt conversations and promote the brand in an implicit way. Unfortunately, many users do not think of these kinds of implicit marketing as alcohol marketing, they think of it as humorous and fun to share with friends (Niland et al., 2016), which contributes to user generated content.

### ***User generated marketing***

Social media is the perfect platform for alcohol brands to engage with users “in specific and strategic ways that aim to stimulate user

generated content that contributes to brands’ image and marketing objectives” (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2013, p. 274). Alcohol brands use user generated content to support their own branding and make users feel more directly connected to the brand (Purves, Stead, & Eadie, 2014). A focus group of adolescents and young adults found user generated alcohol marketing (as well as more casual and subtle marketing) more effective, because it gives the impression it was created by a ‘real person’ (Weaver, Wright, Dietze, & Lim, 2016). This ensures the credibility of the marketing (Weaver et al., 2016). According to research by Niland and colleagues (2016) in which they use interviews with a go-along method, alcohol marketing via social media is not always identified as marketing by young people, but often seen as content for having fun online. Research by Atkinson and colleagues (2017) confirms this. Also, alcohol marketing is sometimes obscured because it is part of friendship activities. Alcohol brands act on friendship practices within the culture of social media by offering humorous content that is alcohol centered. It seems young people only see alcohol marketing for what it is when it’s explicit advertising. Engaging with alcohol content is in this way not viewed as a form of marketing (Atkinson et al., 2017; Niland et al., 2016). Moreover, when they are aware of the marketing character of alcohol brands’ posts, they tend to distance themselves from influence, saying that other people may be influenced through alcohol marketing but not themselves (Atkinson et al., 2017).

Considering that social media is highly interactive and users nowadays are almost constantly online, user generated content has a much greater reach. This way, it is not just advertising, but users themselves give the brand and the product a meaning. It becomes part of the culture within networks on social media and makes it effective marketing that also causes an increase in exposure among young people. Research by Atkinson and colleagues (2017) using interviews with young people, supports this. Brodmerkel and Carah (2013) add that marketing on social media is not just about disseminating advertisements, but also about responding to consumers and

their cultural practices. Marketing messages by alcohol brands and users who respond to it causes a cycle that is very hard to control, and plays right in the alcohol industries' hand. Furthermore, alcohol marketing is particularly attractive to young people because of this cultural online environment by which they "can participate in the whole alcohol thing" (Weaver et al., 2016, p. 483).

User generated content appears in three different ways: 1) Direct responds of users on the brands' posts, 2) self-presentation, in which users use the brand or brands' posts to say something about themselves, and 3) space for conversation, where users share and talk content with each other that is not directly related to a brand (Purves et al., 2014). Alcohol brands use social media to encourage user generated content to promote their brand, and let users become more connected to the brand, and let users promote the brand even more by spreading it through their own social network. Furthermore, user generated content is seen as more authentic by users.

### **III.3 Regulation of alcohol marketing via social media**

The line between commercial advertising and user generated marketing is blurred (Mart, Mergendoller, & Simon, 2009), with users and alcohol brands responding on each other. This makes regulations concerning alcohol marketing through social media hard to set up and enforce effectively. Of the 47 European Member States, 36 have legally binding restrictions regarding alcohol marketing, but most of those concern TV and radio, and regulations concerning other forms of media are mostly directed at spirits, instead of beer and wine (WHO Europe, 2014). De Bruijn, Johansen, and Van den Broeck (2010) identified three types of regulation: Legislation or statutory regulation (both embedded by law), self-regulation, and co-regulation (combination of the prior two). The majority of existing regulations consists of self-regulation.

#### *Self-regulation*

Self-regulation entails voluntary advertising codes and is established in the Digital Guiding Principles report, by an international group of companies from the alcohol industry (IARD, 2014). These principles focus on:

Age restrictions, through age-affirmation. This is order to prevent minors from exposure, but only when the "marketing communications actively engage a user to directly interact with a brand" (IARD, 2014, p. 8).

Responsible consumption, by showing a responsible drinking message on their official social networking site and moderating user generated content. However, the message does not leave a big impression on minors and moderation is hard to enforce.

Transparency, by which they solely mean that they cannot "falsely imply they are an ordinary consumer" (IARD, 2014, p. 11) Privacy, in the meaning of respecting the privacy of users.

Furthermore, these principles are guidelines, meaning brands may deviate from it.

(In) effectiveness of self-regulation

Existing regulations are mostly based on traditional media and not adapted to social media. Although the alcohol industry set their guidelines to apply in the digital marketing space, these are not effective in preventing exposure of alcohol marketing to young people and fails to counterbalance the primary goal of the alcohol industry: to promote and sell. Furthermore, the age restrictions on the largest social networking sites do not apply to the non-official pages and groups (Winpenny et al., 2012), making these regulations ineffective at providing protection for alcohol marketing for minors.

Advertising regulation boards do not agree with the view that the industry has limited control over the content of social media sites. This context being the possibility for users and alcohol brands to interact and the key feature of social media sites to spread content far and rapidly. Regulations will only be effective if they consider the interactive, culturally embedded processes that integrate alcohol

brands' and users' activities (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2013). That means the brands need be held responsible for their own content as well as the interactive content by users (Brodmerkel & Carah, 2013), considering the context.

#### *Fake user profiles*

Three studies focusing on regulation concerning alcohol marketing via social media used fake user profiles to see what regulations exist and how they are adhered to. The first study by Winpenny, Marteau & Nolte (2014) showed that just a small minority of alcohol brands on Facebook used age restrictions and were only accessible by users of legal drinking age. On YouTube however, it is not necessary to mention your age, making it possible for all under aged users to watch all video's and alcohol brands' pages before even logging in. Even after logging in, it was possible for minors to view and follow alcohol brand pages. When trying to access official alcohol brand pages on Twitter, two out of five brands made use of an age restriction. This functioned through a prompt to provide ones age. It was very easy to lie, however, since the individual was not required to log in, making it very easy for under aged users to access all official alcohol brand pages. Although four of the five brands showed a comment about age requirements, it is unlikely that this makes an impression on the young people who have already decided to visit the alcohol brand's page.

A second study (Barry et al., 2015), focusing solely on YouTube, showed that two third of the brands were easily accessible through the homepage by an under aged user profile. The third study, focusing on Twitter and Instagram, used five fake user profiles, of which one was with the legal drinking age (Barry et al., 2016). Just as in the results of Winpenny, Marteau & Nolte (2014), Twitter age restrictions did not prevent users from interacting with the alcohol brand. Instagram makes it possible for under aged users to access, view, interact and follow official alcohol brand pages, moreover, it is possible for other brands to start following the under aged users.

#### **Discussion**

To summarize, the amount of alcohol marketing identified differ between studies, but all show that a large amount of alcohol advertising circulates on social media platforms. Alcohol brands use the interactive and fast-spreading character of social media as efficiently as possible. User generated content provides a large part of these marketing messages. Moreover, user generated content is seen as more genuine than official alcohol advertisements and together with peer influence this exacerbates the negative effects of alcohol marketing on young people. Furthermore, alcohol brands use specific content to ensure their promotion reaches as many users as possible. They use humor, social success and events to. When it comes to regulating this phenomenon, few regulations specifically designed for social media exist.

#### *Statutory regulation of alcohol marketing via social media in Finland*

In January 2015, new restrictions on the advertising of alcoholic beverages entered into force in Finland. The restrictions represent a novel approach as they are focused on techniques used in alcohol advertising, rather than the media used or features of the content of advertisements. The Finnish Alcohol Act prohibits the advertising of beverages containing more than 22% alcohol by volume (abv) and restricts the content and placement of advertising for milder beverages. The new restrictions were intended to and do target primarily alcohol advertising in social media. They prohibit advertising, indirect advertising and sales promotion if 'they involve taking part in a game, lottery or contest' or if the advertising commercial operator in an information network service administered by itself uses any textual or visual content produced by consumers or places into the service textual or visual content, produced by itself or by consumers, which is intended to be shared by consumers. Source: M. Montonen M. & I. Tuominen: Restricting alcohol marketing on social media in Finland; In: Youth drinking cultures in a digital world; 2017-Routledge, UK.

## Limits and recommendations

The research discussed in this study all have a restriction because without the detailed data on website traffic it is very difficult to determine the actual scale of exposure (Winpenny et al., 2012). Since user generated content represents a majority of alcohol marketing via social media future research need to delve further into this domain. It is also important to examine interaction with users and user generated content to get a more complete picture of the phenomenon.

## Conclusion

The exposure of alcohol marketing via social media towards young people is significant and increasing. Many users do not think of implicit marketing as alcohol marketing and the content makes them think of alcohol marketing as humorous and fun to share with friends. This underlines the importance of raising awareness among users and the implementation of effective statutory regulations. The fact that user generated content is a crucial component of alcohol marketing via social media poses additional challenges.

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## Appendix

### Method

The systematic search for peer-reviewed papers was done on 2 February 2017, by a combination of keywords which focused on the subjects of alcohol marketing and social media. The database search provided 715 relevant articles, of which 420 were screened after the duplicates were removed. The screening took place by title and abstract, after which 366 articles were excluded, because they were not relevant enough for the subject of this review or were published before the year 2000. These excluded articles were assessed by a second researcher. By means of expert consultation and backwards citation tracking an additional 8 studies were included. Which means a total of 62 articles were included for full text assessment for eligibility. Of these, 45 articles were excluded with reasons as: Focusing on problem drinking or interventions and full text was not available. Those studies that only included alcohol advertising via traditional media, or did not address alcohol advertising via social media separately, were also excluded. As well as studies that were published in a language other than Dutch or English, and those being an opinion, editorial or review study. In the end, 17 studies were found eligible for inclusion in this systematic review.