

# Deconstructing narratives of alcohol industry involvement in the public health agenda

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# Narratives of alcohol industry as PH partners

## Global Beer, Wine and Spirits Producers' commitments



### REDUCING HARMFUL USE OF ALCOHOL: BEER, WINE AND SPIRITS PRODUCERS' COMMITMENTS

Leading global producers of beer, wine and spirits have made a collective commitment to build on their long-standing efforts to reduce harmful drinking through the **Beer, Wine and Spirits Producers' Commitments**. In recognition of the serious effects that the harmful use of alcohol can have, these producers wish to demonstrate their support of international efforts to improve health and social outcomes for individuals, families and communities through the Commitments.

The 12 CEO signatories and their companies are implementing actions in five key areas over the next five years. The key areas being addressed are:

- Reducing under-age drinking
- Strengthening and expanding marketing codes of practice
- Providing consumer information and responsible product innovation
- Reducing drinking and driving
- Enlisting the support of retailers to reduce harmful drinking



### The world's leading beer, wine, and spirits producers are taking action against COVID-19

IARD member companies are helping fight COVID-19 globally with initiatives including\*:



Supplying over **700 million bottles\*\*** of hand sanitizer



Support for the hospitality industry totaling over **\$125 million**



Taking action on **six continents**



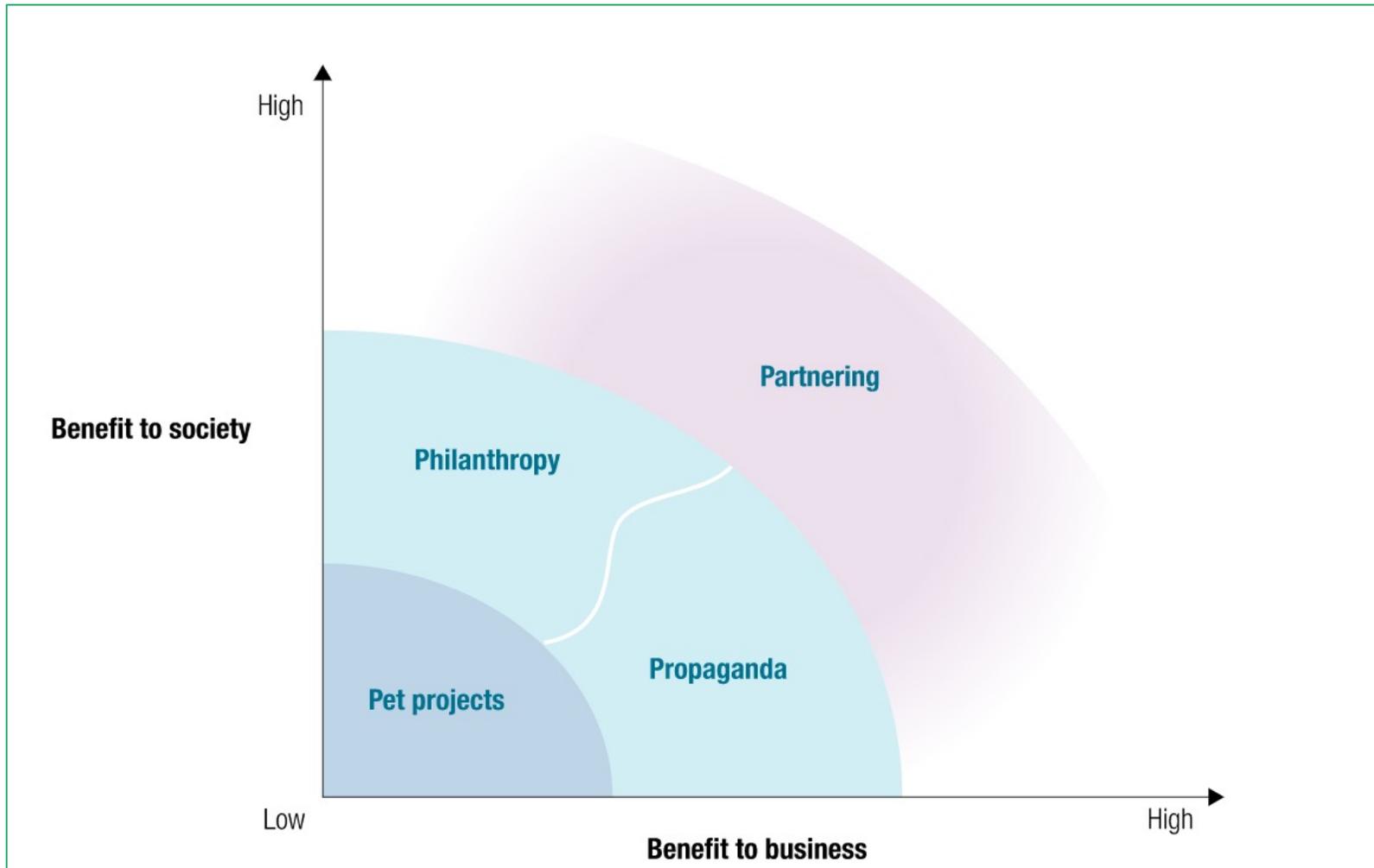
Additional financial contributions totaling over **\$40 million**, with the majority directed towards healthcare, research, and community relief efforts

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health and societal emergency, presenting unique and urgent challenges to the world. The members of the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD) have stepped up to contribute during this time of crisis, using their unique resources and positioning to help through a variety of initiatives. All of IARD's members are helping to address the global shortage of hand sanitizer. Also, they are all supporting workers in the hospitality industry, many of whom are facing financial hardship and job losses due to the pandemic. IARD members are also working in partnership with governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver help where it is most needed. These initiatives and actions are only possible due to partnerships among public, private, and civil society sectors, which can achieve greater impact than any sector working alone.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) jointly **called on the private sector and national governments to collaborate** to fight against COVID-19. And IARD's members are committed to keep working in partnership to do so: helping protect communities across the world and fight COVID-19, as part of a whole-of-society approach.



# CSR and partnerships are not necessarily in public interest



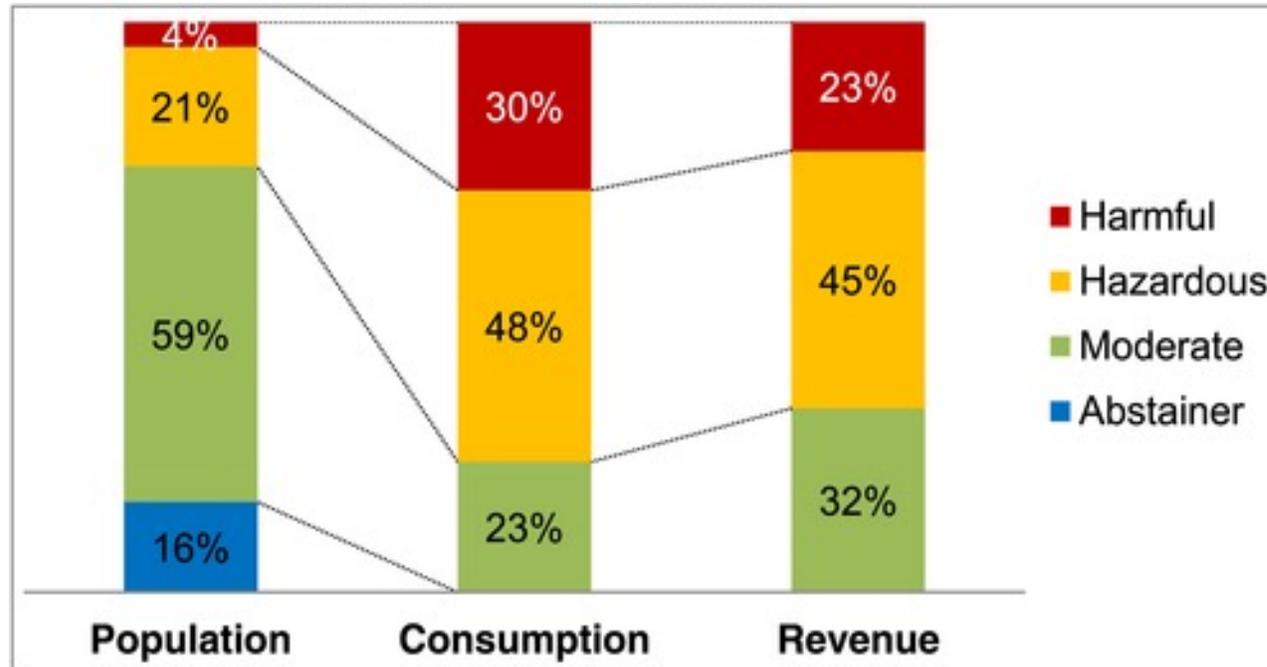
“in what’s best referred to as propaganda, CSR activities are focused primarily on building a company’s reputation with little real benefit to society. Some cynics suggest that this form of CSR is at best a form of advertising—and potentially dangerous if it exposes a gap between the company’s words and actions”.

- 1) Conflicts of interest for the industry in relation to public health goals
- 2) Evidence on how these conflicts of interest manifest in alcohol industry involvement in PH

1) Conflicts of interest for the industry in relation to public health goals

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# Conflict of interest: the source of alcohol industry revenue



Everyone drinking “in moderation” would mean an extremely large drop in profits (approx. 38%, or £13 billion)

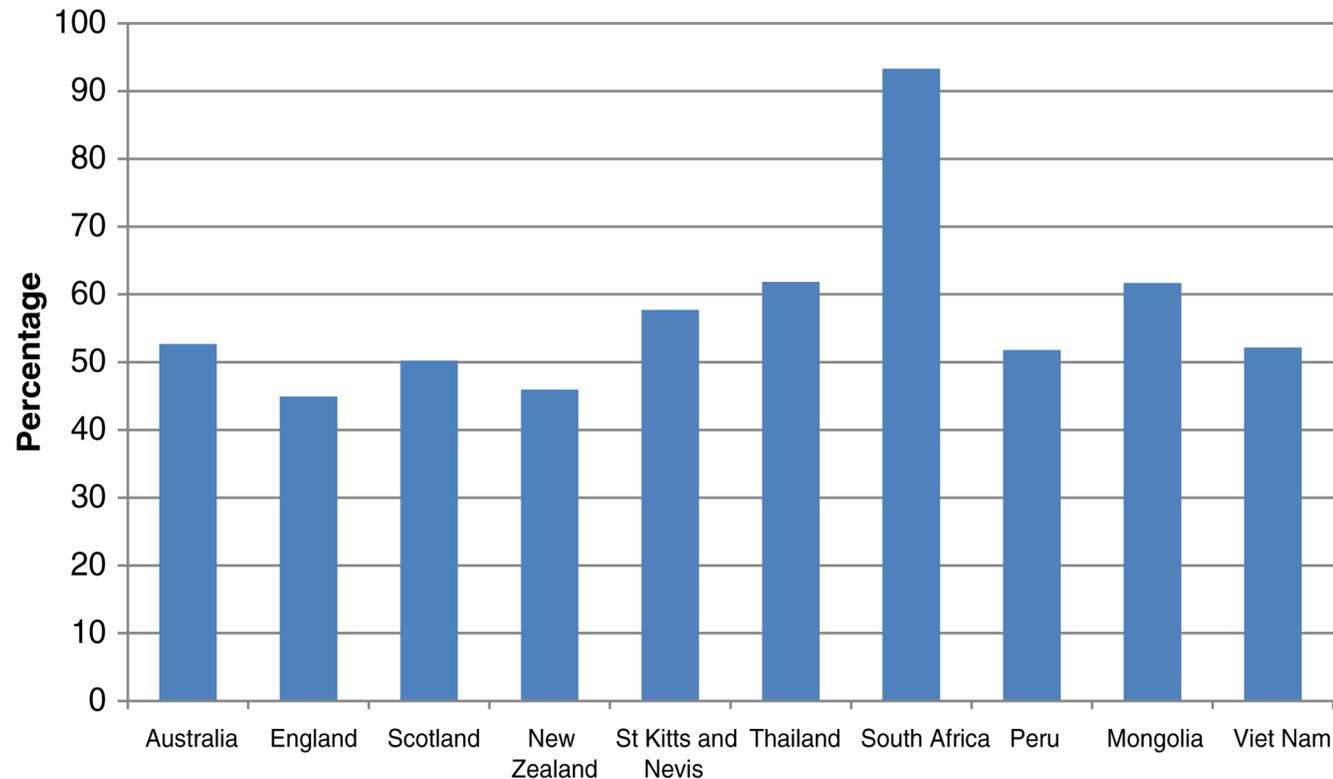
Scenario modelling using descriptive analysis of pooled data from HSE and LCF surveys.

‘moderate’ drinking: below or equal to 14 units per week; ‘hazardous’: 15–35 units for women, 15–50 for men; ‘harmful’: 36+ for women, 51+ for men)

Bhattacharya A et al. *Addiction* 2018;113(12):2225-2232

# Mismatch in revenue vs public health also applies to drinking patterns

## Cross-country comparison of proportion of alcohol consumed in harmful drinking occasions



Cross-country comparison of proportion of alcohol consumed in harmful drinking occasions using the International Alcohol Control Study. Viet Cuong et al. Drug and Alcohol Review 2018;37(Suppl 2):S45-S52

# Study of internal advertising case studies makes this COI explicit

*"As is the case in many post-mature markets, whisky brands are very reliant on a small number of heavy, and increasingly ageing, consumers, to provide the majority of volume... ..Our first advertising task was to protect and build this core drinker base by persuading existing consumers and drinkers of competitive blends to choose The Famous Grouse more often. In the longer term we had to attract more younger drinkers – the heavy-using loyalists of tomorrow" (Famous Grouse case study, 2006)*

*"As with many other markets, the Pareto principle applies: 20% of drinkers account for 80% of sales. So, rather than struggle to make whisky appeal to younger consumers like the premium brands, we chose to focus on the core audience of heavy users. We knew that they were older. We knew they were primarily male. We knew that unlike malt users they tended to be downmarket" (Scottish Leader Whiskey case study, 2003).*



- 1) Conflicts of interest for the industry in relation to public health goals
- 2) How these conflicts of interest manifest in alcohol industry involvement in PH

# Reducing consumption poses a risk to business: A reason the industry tries to get involved in PH

1. Policy substitution<sup>1</sup>: Corporate Social Responsibility is used by unhealthy commodity industries (alcohol, tobacco) to replace evidence-based policies with less-effective alternatives<sup>2,3</sup>
2. It is used to give a “health halo” to their activities
3. It is used as a form of covert marketing, and as a vehicle for misinformation

# Undermining evidence-based policies: Language from alcohol industry submissions to PH policy consultations

Analysis of alcohol, food, soda and gambling industry documents and websites and minutes of reports of relevant health select committees, using standard document analysis methods



Two main framings were identified:

- (i) these industries argue that aetiology is complex, so individual products cannot be blamed
- (ii) population health measures are 'too simple' to address complex public health problems

*"The reasons for alcohol misuse are complex, yet solutions are often simplistic, based around increased regulation... New solutions need to be found therefore. These must be multi-faceted and culturally sensitive. They should not be so wide as to try and reach the entire population... No one size fits all solution for tackling misuse of alcohol exists..."* World Spirits Alliance

# Shaping public knowledge on alcohol harms: the example of cancer

We collected and analysed publicly available information from 27 industry or industry-funded social aspects public relations organisations from around the world

- Included websites, documents, other health guidance they disseminate to the public
- We compared statements on alcohol and cancer to independent sources (UK gov, WHO IARC)



**Most of these alcohol industry-funded organisations appear to be misleading the public on cancer risk**

## **Denial/Omission**

Denying or disputing any link with cancer, or selective omission of the relationship

## **Distortion**

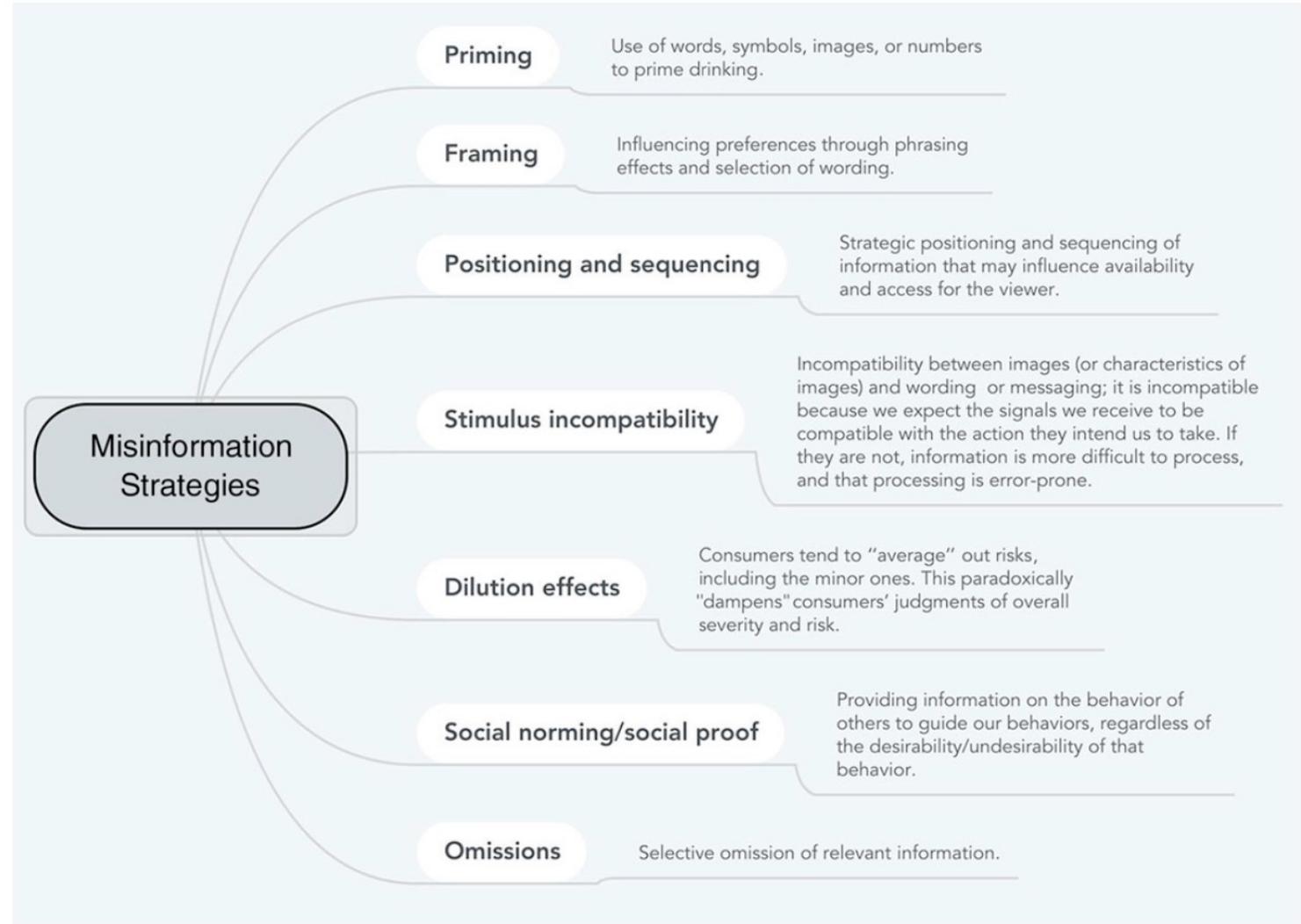
Mentioning some cancer risk, but misrepresenting or obfuscating the nature or size of that risk

## **Distraction**

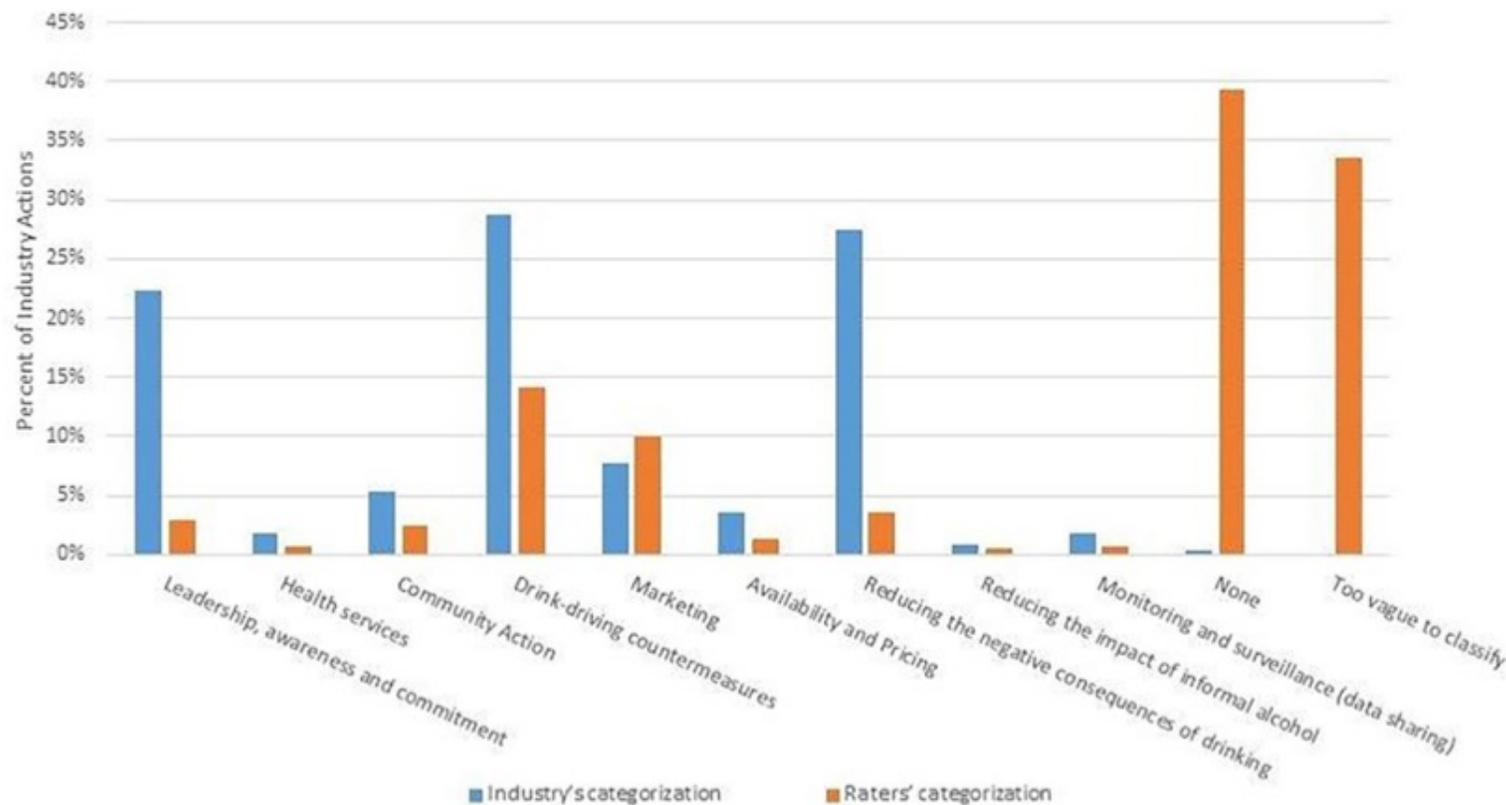
Focusing discussion away from the independent effects of alcohol

# Fostering drinking as a social norm: Dark nudges

Nudge: “Any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives”



# Content analysis of the alcohol industry's reported actions to reduce harmful drinking by public health practitioners



“Alcohol industry CSR activities are unlikely to reduce harmful alcohol use but they do provide commercial strategic advantage while at the same time appearing to have a public health purpose.”<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1** Percent of industry actions classified by International Alliance for Responsible Drinking and by health professionals according to WHO Global strategy target areas.

# Conclusions

- The alcohol industry has great expertise and commercial interest in manufacturing, marketing and selling alcohol (not public health)
- A key reason for its involvement in public health agendas is because effective public health policies pose a potential business risk
- Elements of a common “playbook” to reduce this risk are emerging
- Facilitated by CSR and partnership, this includes fostering doubt about harms, substituting effective approaches with ineffective (or harmful) alternatives, and attempting to shift blame for harms away from products and marketing

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