

Social Media An Alcohol-Saturated Space

The case for regulation of alcohol marketing on social media sites

Summary

The pervasiveness of alcohol-related content and alcohol marketing on social media sites works to normalise alcohol consumption, including excessive drinking.

Alcohol marketers are exploiting the current lack of robust regulation in the social digital space, crafting advertising messages that reach high proportions of young and under-age people. The few regulatory restrictions currently in place are easily circumvented through users giving incorrect dates of birth to access sites, but more pervasively through the use of 'co-created' content. This content is popular, made and shared by young people themselves using 'under-the-radar' digital marketing techniques.

We summarise the evidence supporting the need for an urgent review of alcohol marketing via social media – a challenge that can no longer be ignored if New Zealand is to make a serious commitment to reduce the harm caused by alcohol to our young people and communities.



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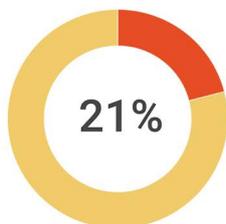
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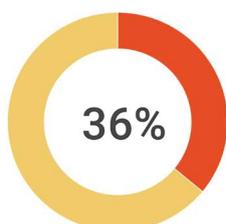
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Percentage of young New Zealanders categorised as displaying problem drinking behaviour

15-17 year olds



18-24 year olds



(Ministry of Health, 2013)

In Aotearoa New Zealand, as in other societies, there is increasing concern about the damaging effects of alcohol, particularly in terms of young people's health and safety. In 2010 The New Zealand Law Commission's report on alcohol within New Zealand called for a "paradigm shift", pointing out that the deregulation of the sale and supply of alcohol over the last two decades has exacerbated the damage caused by drinking. Globally young people drink to intoxication more frequently than older drinkers¹ and this is more likely in countries such as ours that have liberalised alcohol policies.^{2,3}

Exposure to alcohol marketing has been positively associated with the amount and frequency of drinking among adolescents both in Europe⁴ and New Zealand.⁵ In their European longitudinal study on adolescents' alcohol use and exposure to alcohol marketing, De Bruijn et al (2016) concluded that there is an urgent need to limit the extent to which young people are

exposed to alcohol marketing on a daily basis. It's no longer just a matter of restricting television ads; "policymakers need to examine the alcohol industry's total marketing scheme and develop regulations that will reduce all types of alcohol marketing".⁴

The New Zealand Ministerial Forum on Alcohol Advertising and Sponsorship was set up by the government to "make recommendations targeted toward changing the way New Zealanders drink alcohol".⁶ The cover of their 2014 report stated that

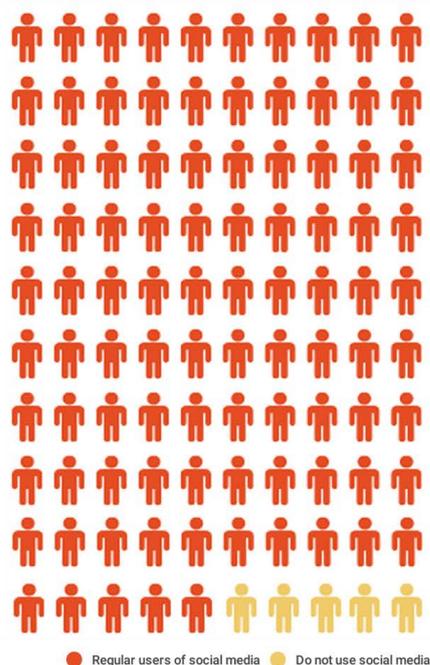
"As a Forum we believe protecting the young from alcohol-related harm is paramount".

However, the Forum failed to address two key factors in the debate around alcohol promotion and sponsorship: the use of social media for marketing, particularly to young people, and the ineffectiveness of industry self-regulation (as noted in a response report by The International Expert Committee on Alcohol Advertising and Sponsorship, 2015).⁷ The Forum's decision that social media marketing was "outside the remit of this review"⁶ put this critical area of alcohol marketing via social media into the "too hard basket", effectively excluding one of

the most important domains in which alcohol marketing occurs in young people's lives.

The vast majority of young people use social media on a regular basis

In New Zealand, approximately **95% of young people aged 16-29** are regular users of social networking sites such as Facebook, in comparison to 85% of New Zealanders overall.



(Crothers et al., 2016)

A review of current local and international research illustrates the following key points that require urgent attention:

1. The prevalence of alcohol-related content and alcohol marketing on social media sites normalises alcohol consumption, including its excessive use.
2. Alcohol marketers are moving their campaigns to social media sites, especially those aimed at young people.
3. The reach of social media marketing extends to under-age drinkers.
4. The line between user-generated content and alcohol marketing produced by corporations is becoming increasingly blurred, and marketers are driving and exploiting this.
5. Exposure to and engagement with alcohol related content via social media has concrete, harmful impacts on drinking behaviour.
6. Industry self-regulation is not working.

Social Media

Social media are saturated with alcohol-related content, both marketing and user-generated.⁹ The overwhelming majority of both commercial marketing and user-generated material conveys positive attitudes towards alcohol consumption.^{10, 11}

Social media are an increasingly commercialised space. Information stored on a user's profile along with access to that of their friends is worth millions to marketers, netting Facebook an average of NZ\$21.24 annually from each of its 1.65 billion regular users worldwide.¹² The reach and returns offered mean that alcohol companies have increasingly moved their marketing into digital and social media environments, a strategy that has exponentially increased youth exposure to pro-alcohol consumption messages.^{13, 14}

This change has led researchers to warn that "alcohol marketing content in social media has the potential to pose even greater risks for promoting alcohol abuse than traditional marketing".¹⁵ Regulation that reflects the changing role and reach of social media is required.

Social media alcohol marketing is big business



NZ\$21.24

The average annual profit Facebook makes in advertising and other fees from each of its 1.65 billion regular users worldwide.

(Facebook, 2016)



NZ\$85.06

A user's dollar value depends on their geographical location - those in the US and Canada are worth the most to Facebook, each netting the company NZ\$85.06 per year.

(Facebook, 2016)



1,017

The number of company-sponsored alcohol-brand related sites identified in a recent survey of Facebook.

(Nhean et al., 2014)



50%

The amount alcohol giant Pernod Ricard has increased its annual digital marketing budget every year for the past few years.

(Johnson, 2015)

1. The prevalence of alcohol-related content and alcohol marketing on social media sites normalises alcohol consumption, including its excessive use.

As a 2016 review shows, alcohol content is very common on social media, and it almost always portrays drinking in positive ways.¹⁶ Furthermore, social media are increasingly accessed on mobile devices (such as smartphones) and thus integrated into young people's everyday lives.

Hundreds of publicly available alcohol-related smartphone apps exist and most of these promote alcohol use.¹⁷ Research consistently illustrates the high level of alcohol-related content on social media¹⁸ which contributes to the normalisation of alcohol consumption for young adults.¹⁹

2. Alcohol marketers are moving their campaigns to social media sites, especially those aimed at young people.

Alcohol companies are shifting their focus and budgets into the digital environment because it is extremely lucrative. In 2015, Adweek, the US advertising trade publication, ran a story entitled 'With better targeting, alcohol brands bet big on digital'²⁰, detailing the exponential growth in alcohol companies marketing on digital platforms.

For example, alcohol giant Pernod Ricard (owner of Smirnoff, Jameson and Kahlua as well as a number of NZ wine brands) “increased its digital budget by more than 50% every year for the past few years”²⁰. Heineken is another big spender, with 25% of the brand’s marketing budget allocated to digital, while working in partnership with social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter “to build mini profiles of users to target its ads against”²⁰. The piece also outlines how brands are “zeroing in on location targeting too”²⁰ through using geo-location technology in mobile phones to create location targeted ads.



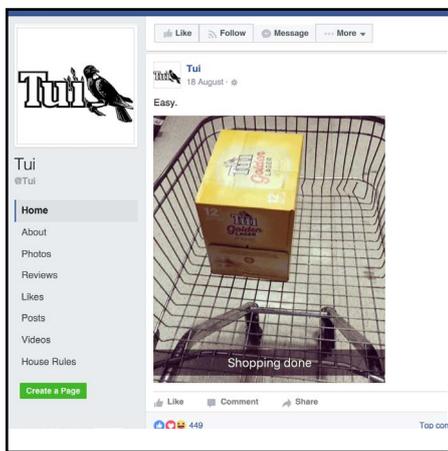
The Heineken Live app, developed in New Zealand, is one example of how brands use geo-location to send consumers targeted advertising and offers.

As the most popular social media site, Facebook is a major player in digital alcohol marketing. Multinational alcohol giant Diageo is one brand that has embraced marketing via Facebook, with individual pages for each of its 30 brands, and routine use of Facebook’s social marketing bootcamps for marketing executives.²¹

“Facebook is now just a central part of all our campaigns.”

(Diageo’s chief marketing officer, Hall, 2012)²²

Advertising on social media allows greater engagement with consumers, promoting ‘interactive relationships’²³, fundamentally altering the landscape of alcohol marketing. In this context young people are not passive recipients but active users who engage with, co-create and disseminate pro-alcohol marketing messages.²⁴



Tui’s Facebook page. Alcohol brands use their branded Facebook pages to encourage consumers to comment and share their own thoughts and images associated with the brand.

3. The reach of social media marketing extends to under-age drinkers.

The reach of alcohol advertising on social media is substantial, and includes significant proportions of young and under-age people. A recent UK study revealed the penetration of alcohol marketing on Facebook, where content was able to reach 89% of males and 91% of females aged 15-24, followed closely by YouTube and then Twitter.²⁵

The highest frequency of alcohol marketing seen by UK adolescents online is on social networking sites.¹¹ The systems employed for age verification within social media platforms such as Facebook are ineffective.

Strategic partnerships between alcohol companies and powerful digital media corporations lead to an even greater penetration of pro-alcohol messages to the lives of young people. As the European Centre for Monitoring Alcohol Marketing has argued, Heineken and Google's global partnership to increase Heineken's YouTube activity is likely to mean "that at least 103 million minors around the world are being exposed to the harmful effects of alcohol marketing on a monthly basis".⁴

Young people, being the most likely to participate in hazardous drinking²⁶, are particularly vulnerable, and are routine and ubiquitous users of social media.^{13, 27} In New Zealand, approximately 95% of young people aged 16-29 are regular users of social networking sites such as Facebook, in comparison to 85% of New Zealanders overall.⁸

Having an online allegiance to an alcohol brand dramatically increases the odds of being a underage drinker

The odds of being a drinker for NZ 13-14 year olds

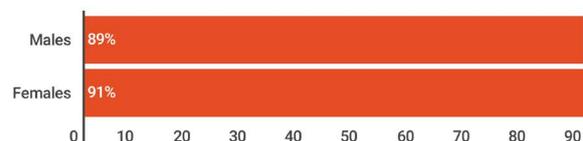


(Lin et al., 2012)

Having an online allegiance to a particular brand increased the odds of being a drinker almost fourfold.⁵

Alcohol marketing on Facebook reaches underage young people

% of 15-24 year olds in the UK who can access alcohol marketing on Facebook



(Winpenny et al., 2013)

Social media alcohol marketing is related to the age of initiation into drinking, as well as frequency and volume of consumption. One US study found that 11-13 year olds who viewed alcohol related content on social media were more likely to be a drinker one year later.²⁸

Alcohol media exposure was not only related to increased alcohol use, but also created an escalating spiral in which alcohol-related content stimulated alcohol experimentation, which led to seeking more associated media, ultimately resulting in developing an identity as a drinker.²⁸

In New Zealand, a 2012 study revealed that engagement with digital alcohol marketing by 13 and 14 year olds almost doubled their odds of being a drinker, while having an online allegiance to a particular brand related to greater frequency of alcohol consumption and drinking larger quantities, and increased the odds of being a drinker almost fourfold.⁵

Young people need to be protected from alcohol marketing through effective regulation⁵, and this includes social media, which is now the prime medium through which many young people access information.^{8, 29}



Brands 'stimulate' the mediation of nightlife for commercial gain: Clubs, pubs, music, sports events and other spaces of consumption are inherently promotional spaces.³² 'Nightlife Photographers' create promotional images to circulate online. Young consumers are encouraged to tag and share these images via social networking sites.

4. The line between user-generated content and alcohol marketing produced by corporations is becoming increasingly blurred.

Alcohol marketers use social media and the unparalleled consumer information it provides to 'microtarget' potential consumers, immersing them in online marketing environments such as games and contests.¹⁵ These marketers encourage posting, sharing and interacting while providing promotional content that can be virally transmitted through peer networks, while simultaneously engaging in real-world promotions such as events or competitions.³⁰

On social media it can be difficult to distinguish what is marketing material and what is not. Many alcohol brands deliberately craft advertisements to mimic friend's interactions in a user's newsfeed. Engagement marketing strategies noted above actively involve users in content development and sharing; users become "co-creators" of marketing stimuli instead of passive recipients.¹⁴

Specialist alcohol marketing agencies mine data from Facebook profiles and use geo-location software in order to "target specific groups of consumers" and "drive foot traffic" based on location and what is popular with certain demographics.³²

Young people also openly share alcohol marketing content through social networking sites, and comment that alcohol promotional activities on social media directly influence their consumption behaviour^{14, 31}.

5. Exposure to and engagement with alcohol-related content via social media is related to problematic and harmful drinking behaviour.

A recent review of research concluded that posting alcohol-related content on Facebook has been consistently related to "alcohol consumption, alcohol-related problems, cravings, and clinical measures of risk for alcoholism".¹⁶ In longitudinal studies, exposure to drinking content on Facebook is related to subsequent drinking behaviours. This may be because online content plays a part in creating individual and group identities and it affects perceived social norms. Direct digital marketing and alcohol promotion on social media sites also contribute.¹⁶

Experimental research shows that mere exposure to alcohol messages on social media affects people's intentions to consume alcohol and engage in alcohol-related behaviours.³³ A recent review of research with university students concluded "it is the sheer quantity of

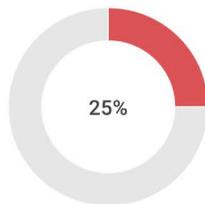
quantity of social networking sites' alcohol content (i.e., descriptive norms) that has the most significant effect on a student's own alcohol use".³⁴

Research with over 9,000 adolescents across four European countries (Germany, Italy, The Netherlands and Poland) found that frequent exposure to online alcohol marketing was significantly related to their decisions to start drinking and incidences of binge drinking in the previous 30 days.⁴ Actively engaging with social media marketing was also more strongly linked to drinking outcomes. Similar findings were obtained in a sample of Australian young people³⁵, while a recent UK study demonstrated that digital alcohol marketing reached young people more effectively than traditional alcohol marketing, and was strongly associated with high levels of episodic drinking.³⁶

Under-age young people's exposure to online alcohol marketing

Of the 9038 13-14 year olds surveyed in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland:

One in four respondents received promotional emails containing alcohol advertisements



One in five looked at websites for alcohol brands



One in three used a profile website on social media with an alcohol advertisement



Two in three respondents noticed an alcohol advertisement on an Internet page



Almost one in five downloaded a screensaver containing an alcohol advertisement



(de Bruijn et. al., 2016)

6. Industry self-regulation is not working.

Alcohol marketing is big business in New Zealand. Six years ago the alcohol industry was spending over \$400,000 per day promoting drinking.³⁷ The continuation of an industry self-regulation model fails to recognize public health concerns that should take precedence over commercial interests. While this model has very successfully advanced the agendas of the marketing and alcohol industries, it has not promoted the public good, in New Zealand or elsewhere.⁷

Evidence shows that self-regulation is ineffective and initial breaches go unpunished, so there is little motivation for marketers to comply with the few standards that are currently in place.⁷

In Conclusion

Alcohol marketing on social media is an avoidable danger to our young people's health. It is critical that we consider ways of reducing the number of pro-alcohol messages young New Zealanders are exposed to, a commitment made by the 2014 Ministerial Forum on Alcohol Advertising and Sponsorship (MFAAS). However the MFAAS report lacked any recommendation to restrict alcohol marketing through social media, the media source with by far the greatest reach to young people.⁸ The government needs to limit the volume of alcohol marketing on social media through legislation.

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