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## Critical social marketing - the impact of alcohol marketing on youth drinking: qualitative findings

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**“CRITICAL SOCIAL MARKETING – THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL MARKETING ON YOUTH DRINKING: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS.”****ABSTRACT**

This paper presents findings from exploratory qualitative research as part of a critical social marketing study examining the impact of alcohol marketing communications on youth drinking. The findings from stakeholder interviews (regulators and marketers) suggest that some alcohol marketing may target young people and that marketers are cognisant of growing concern at alcohol issues, including control of alcohol marketing. Focus groups with young people (aged 13-15 years) revealed a sophisticated level of awareness of, and involvement in, alcohol marketing across several channels. It was found that some marketing activity featured content that could appeal to young people and appeared to influence their, well-developed, brand attitudes. The research demonstrates the utility of taking a critical social marketing approach when examining the impact of alcohol marketing. The implications of these findings for research, regulation and policy around alcohol marketing are also examined. The contribution that studies such as this make to marketing principles and practice, and to social marketing, is also discussed.

**KEYWORDS**

Alcohol, Social, Critical, Marketing, Young people, Qualitative research, Regulation

## INTRODUCTION

This paper describes qualitative findings from a study examining the impact of alcohol marketing on young people and any implication this may have on regulation. There is much debate within the academic marketing discipline as to where such studies fit into the existing literature. One suggestion is that studies on the impact of commercial marketing on society fit within the critical marketing and social marketing paradigms and can be termed as critical social marketing research (Hastings, 2007). Critical social marketing research can be defined as the study of the impact of commercial marketing on society using a critical theory based approach, to generate understanding, contribute to the evidence base, and to inform upstream social marketing, and policy and regulation.

The critical marketing paradigm emerged as a result of radical social, economic and political changes, which lead academics to call for a critical appraisal of marketing and marketing theory (Brownlie *et al.* 1994; Thomas, 1999). Indeed critical theory has been identified as one of the paradigmatic approaches in market and consumer research (Murray and Ozanne, 1991; Lowe *et al.* 2003). However, differences in interpretation and understanding remain (Saren *et al.* 2007; Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008). Heretofore critical marketing has been identified as somewhat esoteric and rarefied (Burton, 2001; Tregear, 2007).

Social marketers have responded to the development of critical marketing by outlining the contribution that social marketing can make (Hastings and Saren, 2003; Gordon *et al.* 2007). Goldberg has argued that social marketing has a part to play in addressing “the

negative or constraining social structural influences on individual behaviour, particularly those that originate as a function of marketing activities” (Goldberg, 1995, p347). Using Lazer and Kelley’s (1973) definition of social marketing it is clear that critical research is very much within the jurisdiction of the discipline;

*“Social marketing is concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts, and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. It is also concerned with analysis of the social consequence of marketing policies, decisions and activities.”* (p. ix emphasis added)

This type of research is also identified with upstream social marketing. Indeed an upstream approach also has ties to the critical theory paradigm (Burton, 2001; Lowe *et al.* 2003). Upstream social marketing can involve building an evidence base, media advocacy, policy change, regulation and law making. Traditionally social marketing has adhered to the structuralist-functionalist paradigm, focusing on individual level interventions predominantly within the public health domain. Until recently upstream efforts were given little consideration. This drew criticism from many within social marketing who called for more attention to fundamental social structural conditions upstream (Wallack, 1990; Novelli, 1996).

In response, a stream of thought has emerged advocating a shift in focus within the social marketing field towards upstream applications (Andreasen, 2005; Goldberg, 1995). There have been calls for greater concentration on life changing options and increased attention

to substantive issues such as public policy (Wells, 1993; Shimp, 1994). Marketing research to inform regulation on issues such as tobacco (MacFadyen *et al.* 2001), unhealthy foods (Hastings *et al.* 2003; Ofcom, 2006) and alcohol marketing, and also community interventions designed to effect policy changes, are areas where upstream social marketing can be applied.

It appears that the critical dimension of social marketing remains less well defined, or indeed ignored, by the most commonly used definitions of social marketing (Dann, in press). Perhaps this offers some insight into why the critical contribution of social marketing is uneasily positioned, seeking acceptance and legitimacy amongst both social marketers and critical marketers (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). Nevertheless the critical contribution of social marketing should not be dismissed and holds considerable potential for improving marketing theory and practice, as well as protecting society from some of the damaging effects of commercial marketing. This paper describes the findings from exploratory qualitative research from a study using a critical social marketing framework to assess the impact of alcohol marketing on youth drinking.

## **ALCOHOL MARKETING**

Given the societal costs associated with alcohol misuse high quality critical research and an upstream policy perspective is warranted. This is especially so given that the last decade has witnessed a 24% increase in alcohol consumption in the UK (HM Government, 2007). There has also been an increase in levels of binge drinking,

especially amongst young people (Hibell *et al.* 2004, Diment *et al.* 2007). Indeed, the UK now holds the unenviable position of having one of the highest recorded rates of binge drinking and associated harm in the whole of Europe (WARC, 2004).

These trends also raise particular health concerns as there is clear evidence identifying regular recreational alcohol use in adolescence as a powerful predictor of alcohol dependence among young adults (Bonomo *et al.* 2004). Alcohol consumption is associated with a broad range of social and health problems, at both personal and societal level (WHO, 2002; Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2003). The government has stated that, as yet, there is a lack of evidence of a causal effect between alcohol marketing and drinking behaviour and that more research is required (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2004), hence the need for a study such as this. However, the evidence base has since developed and the debate has moved on with several studies suggesting a small, but significant effect on behaviour (Stacey *et al.* 2004; Collins *et al.* 2007; Henriksen *et al.* 2008). Indeed a recent systematic review of the evidence suggests that alcohol advertising and promotion increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and drink more if they are already using alcohol (Anderson *et al.* in press).

This subsequently raises questions over the nature and effectiveness of the current regulatory system controlling alcohol marketing in the UK. Existing regulation of alcohol marketing in the UK comprises both co-regulatory and voluntary codes in order to protect young people (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Co-regulatory and voluntary alcohol marketing codes in the UK**

<u>Co-Regulatory</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>TV Advertising Standards Code</u>: Advertisements for alcoholic drinks must not be likely to appeal strongly to people under 18, in particular by reflecting or being associated with youth culture. Children must not be seen or heard, and no-one who is, or appears to be, under 25 years old may play a significant role in advertisements for alcoholic drinks. No-one may behave in an adolescent or juvenile way.</li> <li>• <u>Radio Advertising Standards Code</u>: Alcoholic drink advertising must not be aimed at those aged below 18 years or use treatments likely to be of particular appeal to them.</li> <li>• <u>Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) Rules on the Schedule of Advertising</u>: Alcoholic drinks may not be advertised in or adjacent to children's programmes or programmes commissioned for, principally directed at or likely to appeal particularly to audiences below the age of 18.</li> </ul>
<u>Voluntary</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Portman Group Code of Practice on the Naming, Packaging and Promotion of Alcohol Drinks</u>: Drink, its packaging and any promotional material or activity should not in any direct or indirect way have a particular appeal to under 18s.</li> <li>• <u>British Code of Advertising, Sales, Promotion and Direct Marketing</u>: Marketing communications should not be directed at people under 18 through the style of presentation, content or context in which they appear. Marketing communications should not be associated with people under 18 or reflect their culture. People shown drinking or playing a significant role should neither be nor look under 25 and should not be shown behaving in an adolescent or juvenile way.</li> </ul>

This study was funded as part of the NPRI<sup>1</sup> and examines the impact of alcohol marketing on youth drinking during the period when most young people start experimenting with alcohol, from ages 13 to 15. Research of this kind is important not only for any associations with the social and critical marketing paradigms, but also for the wider generic marketing discipline. Criticisms of commercial marketing have been well documented (Thomas, 1999; Klein, 2000) yet the opportunity remains for marketing to be involved in the process of regulating itself. The utility of critical marketing research to generate useful findings and learning to inform an optimal regulatory environment should

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<sup>1</sup> The National Preventive Research Initiative (NPRI) is an initiative to support high quality research aimed at identifying effective approaches to reduce risk factors and influence health behaviour in order to positively impact upon the incidence of new cases of major preventable diseases. The initiative is supported by a consortium of major research bodies and charities including the Economic and Social Research Council; Medical Research Council; British Heart Foundation; Cancer Research UK; Department of Health; Diabetes UK; Food Standards Agency; Research and Development Office for the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services; Chief Scientist Office, Scottish Executive Health Department; Wales Office of Research & Development; World Cancer Research Fund.

not be discounted. This is especially so as the suggestion that the wider marketing discipline be involved in efforts to be more socially responsible is not a new one (Wilkie and Moore, 1999).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research described here used qualitative research techniques to explore issues around alcohol marketing. Firstly, one-to-one interviews (n=10) were conducted with marketing and communications professionals working in the alcohol field to generate understanding and explore attitudes towards current marketing techniques and the regulatory environment, using purposive snowball sampling.

Secondly, focus group research was carried out to explore how adolescents respond to the industry communication strategies. Non-directive, qualitative research techniques that have been previously identified as having value when researching alcohol and young people (Strunin, 2001) were employed. This included interactive activities such as viewing adverts, identifying masked and unmasked brands, and a brand mapping exercise in which respondents offered their views on particular alcohol brands. Purposive sampling was used to generate a sample of 64 respondents, aged 13-15, who were divided into eight focus groups. The research team have considerable experience of conducting research on sensitive issues, and with specific population groups such as young people. Full ethical approval was received, and interviews followed market research society guidelines. Sample composition (see Table 1) was weighted towards drinkers to enable exploration of the role of alcohol in their lives and any impact marketing may have on

attitudes and behaviour. The focus groups were recorded, with prior consent from respondents, transcribed and then analysed thematically using QSR NVivo 7 software. The first stages of the research reported here have also been used to inform a two-wave survey of a cohort of young people carried out at the next stage of the project (not reported here).

**Table 1: Demographic information (gender, age and socio-economic status) and drinking status of focus groups**

Group	Gender	Age	Socio-Economic group	Drinking Status*
1	Male	13	ABC1	Non-drinkers
2	Female	13	C2DE	Drinkers
3	Male	13	C2DE	Drinkers
4	Female	14	ABC1	Drinkers
5	Male	14	ABC1	Drinkers
6	Female	15	C2DE	Non-drinkers
7	Male	15	ABC1	Drinkers
8	Female	15	C2DE	Drinkers

\* Drinking status was defined as according to the SALSUS survey 2004 (Scottish Executive, 2004).

## RESULTS

### *Informant Interviews*

Some marketers indicated that the market was relatively stale and that new product development had been neglected somewhat in recent years. Changes within the alcohol market itself were also highlighted, including the growth of the off-trade and mergers and brand consolidation within the alcohol industry.

*“The market is ready for a new category I think. I’m convinced there is something that is not ale and not lager, but something in the middle. It has just got too lager dominated. It has got boring.”*

(Male, Marketing Account Manager, Scotland)

*“The projection is that people are going to be buying more from the off-trade than the on-trade, which is a massive turnaround from the way the market was ten years ago.”*

(Male, Marketing Agency Directory, Scotland)

Interviewees also highlighted changes in alcohol marketing communications with a shift away from traditional brand advertising to more experiential (linking brands to consumer experiences) and new media marketing. Interestingly, a marketing executive stated that some of the tactics used to market alcohol pushed the boundaries of acceptability, and an industry regulator speculated upon marketing activity deliberately targeted at young people.

*“I've seen more of a shift ... away from a reliance on traditional brand advertising ... I think the major change recently that will continue is much more experiential marketing.”*

(Male, Marketing Account Manager, Scotland)

*“they're using more 'under-the-radar' tactics to target young people.”*

(Female, Executive Officer, Industry Regulatory Body, UK)

*“What often happens in advertising is advertisers try to push the rules as much as they can because obviously that is how you get...racier ads and you get a bit of controversy now and then and that has never hurt any brand.”*

(Male, Marketing Account Manager, Scotland)

The fact that one account manager commented on how marketing activity often pushed the rules to the limit, which certainly flouts the spirit, if not the letter, of the codes, raises concerns about the effectiveness of the current regulatory system. Moreover, if alcohol marketers are willing to test the limits of marketing codes, then this may extend to targeting youth, as suggested by an industry regulator.

Importantly, interviews revealed that marketing practitioners acknowledged the debate around regulation of alcohol marketing. Several interviewees were generally accepting of the fact that restrictions on their creative freedom and tighter controls on alcohol marketing regulation may be forthcoming; as attention on regulation and practice increases.

*“The inevitable consequences of sustained binge drinking will be the government will crack down on alcohol advertising and that will follow on the back of no smoking legislation.”*

(Male, Managing Director, Communications Company, England)

*“I think there’s going to be quite a lot of pressure on alcohol marketing.”*

(Female, Communications Officer, England)

*“Brand marketers are accepting that we have got to move towards a day when – it will just have to be a different way of getting your messages across.”*

(Female, Marketing Account Manager, England)

*“It is a realistic scenario to say that in five years time alcohol advertising will be banned ... everyone has got to behave as an industry pretty impeccably to stop that process speeding up.”*

(Male, Marketing Account Manager, Scotland)

This final comment is most revealing and suggests the alcohol industry and marketers acknowledge the need to be more socially responsible. However another motivation for this may be to safeguard industry interests.

### ***Qualitative Focus Groups with Young People***

The findings from the focus group research, carried out for stage 2 of the project, offered insights into the attitudes towards alcohol and alcohol marketing, and brand awareness of young people.

#### ***Awareness and Attitudes***

Several respondents displayed a sophisticated level of consumer awareness of alcohol including cost, availability, % Alcohol by volume (ABV), brand awareness and brand

image. Most knew the cost of a wide range of alcoholic drinks and could identify several of the brands shown to them.

*“The two vodkas are dead strong cos they are 37%.”*

(Male, 13, ABC1, Non-Drinker)

*“For the tonic wine its £5.15 for a full bottle and for a half bottle, its £2.89 in my local shop.”*

(Female, 14, ABC1, Drinker)

In terms of awareness of, and exposure to, alcohol marketing most respondents were able to name adverts or forms of alcohol marketing they had seen. Both males and females commonly named TV adverts, football adverts or sponsorship of football teams, including shirt sponsorship, as channels in which they had seen alcohol marketing. Several respondents also mentioned exposure to marketing in new media channels, seeing adverts on websites and pop-ups featuring alcohol brands. One group of respondents reported the use of alcohol brand logos as ‘skins’ to decorate mobile phone screensavers or web profile pages. Print media, including newspapers and magazines, was also mentioned, as were price promotions in shops and supermarkets. Some respondents were even able to name specific deals currently available in shops in their area. The findings reinforced the comments made by advertising executives concerning the nature of, and channels involved in, alcohol marketing and the fact that young people were being exposed to such communications. Furthermore, when considering the regulatory codes

summarised in figure 1 it is apparent that youth are being reached by a considerable amount of alcohol marketing activity.

*“In the Strongbow advert they go round this bar and ask men to drink it and they all say it’s great.”*

(Males, 13, ABC1, Non-Drinker)

*“Rangers and Celtic are sponsored by Carling. It would be hard to find someone who didn’t know what Carling was.”*

(Males, 13, ABC1, Non-Drinker)

*“On the internet I get pop ups for alcohol, and if you go to the Rangers website, or Celtic then a Carling sign comes up.”*

(Females, 14, ABC1, Drinker)

### *Branding*

Brand image was important to personal identity and peer acceptance, with some branded vodkas conveying a desirable brand image because of the association with humour and coolness and also due to their strength, and certain alcopop brands viewed as undesirable because of the association with younger drinkers. The marketing of particular brands contributed to their image amongst young respondents, with the use of humour and material that appeals to youth being viewed as appealing. This would appear to contravene codes of practice, which forbid any alcohol marketing activity that appeals to

under-18s or reflects youth culture. Key issues in brand selection were image, strength and value for money, with brands with a higher % ABV, ie. those most likely to offer ‘a buzz’, being the preferred option. Image was very important in terms of how young drinkers are viewed by their peers, with the selected drink acting almost as an extension of their self-identity. The importance of image cannot be underestimated, with young people claiming that they would not be seen drinking certain brands; they instead opted for desirable brands, which had a good image and fit better with their self-image, self-identity and image amongst their peers. Several of the brands preferred had various urban myths or stories attached to them that seemed to be passed around by word of mouth or in internet chat rooms.

*“Smirnoff vodka is cool.”*

(Female, 13, C2DE, Drinker)

*“I prefer WKD to Bacardi Breezer. It's just because most people would probably rather drink that one and be seen with it, it's got a better image. I've seen them advertised, the WKD, the adverts are good, dead funny.”*

(Females, 14, ABC1, Drinker)

*“With Bacardi Breezer it's too embarrassing. It's like walking about with all your friends and you look like an idiot.”*

(Female, 13, C2DE, Drinker)

*“It's just like a tradition thing where you see all these people drinking Buckfast and you think, oh, that must be nice.”*

(Female, 14, ABC1, Drinker)

## **DISCUSSION**

Although our findings offer an interesting insight into the issue of alcohol marketing and young people in the UK it must be recognised that qualitative research has some limitations. Given the small sample size, non-random sampling technique employed, and the sample bias towards drinkers, it is not possible to make generalisations to the larger population about the findings. Nonetheless our findings are consistent with the existing evidence base on the extent, nature, and influence of alcohol marketing on youth drinking behaviour (Meier *et al.* 2008). The findings from the qualitative research indicate that alcohol marketing is both dynamic and evident across a wide range of marketing channels. The focus group research revealed a high level of awareness of alcohol marketing across several channels by respondents, who exhibited well-developed brand attitudes. Respondents demonstrated clear brand preferences relating to brand image among peers, for example, preferring WKD to Bacardi Breezer due to its image and thus demonstrating the importance that brand image holds for young drinkers (Caswell and Zhang, 1998). The respondents related the image of certain brands to the way in which they were marketed, for instance, the way that WKD is advertised appeared to influence the brands image. As the WKD brand is marketed using irreverent ‘school-boy’ type humour its appeal to those under the legal drinking age should come as little surprise.

Young people had a particularly high awareness of, and exposure to, sports sponsorship. This seemed to impact upon attitudes towards the brands involved in such activities, which generates unease at the role of alcohol in sports sponsorship (Hill and Caswell, 2001). That youth displayed sophisticated consumer knowledge of alcohol marketing demonstrates that they are widely exposed to alcohol marketing and that it influences their attitudes and behaviour (Hastings *et al.* 2005). Brands that use particular marketing strategies that appeal to youth, such as playground humour and use of youth language, were found to generate particularly strong and identifiable brand awareness and image.

From the high levels of awareness of alcohol marketing and the detailed knowledge displayed by respondents, some as young as 13 years of age, it is apparent that at least some young people below the legal drinking age are exposed to alcohol marketing and that such marketing could have an effect on their attitudes and behaviour. This is consistent with previous research that suggest a small but significant impact on behaviour (Stacy *et al.* 2004; Snyder *et al.* 2006; Collins *et al.* 2007). Despite these, and similar findings, debate continues on the strength of the evidence base linking alcohol marketing with behaviour. However, there can be no question that these levels of awareness levels are disconcerting, with public health experts and lobbyists calling for stronger regulation. Given that some marketing executives interviewed acknowledged that some marketing tactics flout the spirit, if not the letter, of the law, consolidating the regulatory environment would seem an appropriate response. This is reinforced by the focus group findings which demonstrate the high awareness of alcohol marketing across a number of channels by young people, with some of this marketing featuring references to youth

culture, or containing adolescent or juvenile behaviour; which youth may find appealing (Aitken *et al.* 1988; Ofcom and ASA, 2007). Furthermore, much of this alcohol marketing activity occurs in new media channels (Jernigan, 2001), which remain largely unregulated by existing regulatory codes. This suggests that the regulation of alcohol marketing in the UK needs to be re-examined, as it is failing in its goal to adequately protect children (Alcohol Concern, 2007). These codes, therefore, appear unsatisfactory on three levels:

1. They fail to provide effective cover for all forms of alcohol marketing such as new media and sponsorship.
2. They do not reflect current alcohol marketing activity and, moreover, lack an appropriate monitoring system, which means that there is little in the way of pre-vetting.
3. They fail to act as a suitable deterrent to bad marketing practices, largely a consequence of weak enforcement and lack of stringent penalties (Caswell and Maxwell, 2005; BMA Board of Science, 2009). This may result in some alcohol marketing activity that breaks both the spirit and indeed the letter of the codes, although proper evaluation of the effectiveness of the current regulatory system is lacking.

For effective regulation of alcohol marketing to be achieved there is a requirement for a strong and sound evidence base to inform the regulatory framework. The findings from critical social marketing research such as this contributes to the evidence base and can

inform upstream social marketing efforts to influence and assist policy makers in constructing effective regulation of alcohol marketing. Indeed findings from this study have contributed to discussions in the European Alcohol and Health Forum, and the Health Select Committee in the UK.

A stronger regulatory framework may be required, one in which young people are protected from exposure to, and involvement, with alcohol marketing (Caswell and Maxwell, 2005; BMA Board of Science, 2009). Indeed some advertising executives interviewed thought that statutory regulation may be forthcoming. Effective independent monitoring and pre-vetting of marketing executions, the application of regulations across all marketing channels, not just broadcast media (TV, radio and print), limitations on the amount of exposure to and not just on the content of alcohol marketing, and stronger penalties that act as a proper deterrent to breaking the rules such as a ban on marketing brands for a set period for breaches of regulations, are just some suggestions that may strengthen the regulatory system.

Research findings such as those offered here can and should be used to inform debate and development of policy and regulation around alcohol marketing. It is important for marketers to be involved in this evidential process. If marketers and marketing academics reflect upon research findings such as these then improvements to marketing principles and practice, such as taking a more socially responsible approach to alcohol marketing, could result. Such a process could be used to develop marketing theory to ensure that the potential societal impact of marketing activity is properly assessed and considered when

designing and executing marketing campaigns. The involvement of the marketing sector in this process would correspond with long established marketing academic traditions (Wilkie and Moore, 2003). Critical studies of marketing activity can help contribute towards the social marketing and critical marketing paradigms and also provide avenues towards finding intelligent solutions (Gordon *et al.* 2007). The research demonstrates that critical social marketing brings an important dimension to the debate surrounding alcohol issues and the regulation of alcohol marketing.

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