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The Conversation

Alcohol marketing to young people via social media

Professor Christine Griffin, Department of Psychology, University of Bath

“Facebook pages flooded with booze promos” has been a hot topic on Facebook and twitter recently. This refers to research findings from Australia on...

The recent growth of social media, especially amongst under 25s, has created unprecedented opportunities for marketing alcohol products, given the integration into mobile technologies and digital camera/video applications, and the ubiquity of user-generated content (UGC). Diageo, the British-based multi-national company that owns many familiar alcohol brands (such as...), has invested heavily in social media alcohol marketing (SMAM). In 2010 SMAM accounted for 21% of Diageo’s marketing budget. The company extended their multi-million dollar partnership with Facebook in 2011, arguing that Diageo brands had collectively enjoyed a 20% increase in sales as a direct result of Facebook activity.

SMAM usually involves a multi-platform social media presence as well as smartphone apps and blogs, often alongside traditional offline marketing. Platforms encourage users to interact with sites via the ‘like’ ‘comment’ and ‘share’ functions, posting photos of themselves and their friends on nights out.

In addition, many bars and clubs have their own photographers who post pictures of guests onto the clubs’ own social media pages. Such venues have an active online presence which is highly interactive, and are less visible beyond their youthful clientele. As well as selling users’ data on to third parties, marketers can use this information to send targeted messages to young people about cheap deals, prompting them to drink alcohol. Social media also offer new opportunities for viral marketing, such as ‘astroturfing’, advergaming and UGC.

Exposure to alcohol advertising and promotion increases young people’s alcohol consumption and positive attitudes to drinking, with most studies focussing on the impact of offline advertising content, exposure and appealing messages in branding. Research has struggled to keep pace with rapidly changing social media platforms and online practices, especially the growth of video material and UGC.

Alcohol is a pervasive theme in young people’s social media interactions, and a top index of ‘user engagement’ online. SMAM blurs the boundary between marketing and socialising, with the possibility of reinforcing the culture of intoxication. Alcohol marketers use sophisticated techniques to infiltrate young people’s everyday social lives to produce ‘intoxigenic digital spaces’ that represent drinking as a routine and essential component of celebrations. Recent research in New Zealand indicates that young adult drinkers do not necessarily view online alcohol marketing as advertising, treating it as useful information about where to find cheap drink.

Researchers have highlighted the need to monitor alcohol advertising and review marketing regulations regarding the potential impact of SMAM on children and young people. Alcohol marketing in the UK is regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), via a voluntary Code of Advertising Practice (CAP). Facebook launched in the UK in 2004, with SMAM via mobile and digital technologies only expanding since 2010, but the last major

review of the Code of Advertising Practice in the UK was in 2005. There remains considerable concern over the effectiveness of the current voluntary code to deal with the challenges and complexities of SMAM to young people for the following reasons:

- 1) The Advertising Standards Authority recognises the age affirmation restriction commonly applied by alcohol brands to limit access to their online marketing materials as a problem, although children and young people are often blamed for 'non-compliance'.
- 2) The current CAP prohibits advertising that represents alcohol as enhancing social success, associated with adolescent humour, portraying young people drinking in harmful or irresponsible ways. Assessment of advertising content is based on subjective judgements, and since the ASA panel does not include input from anyone under 35, it is unlikely to appreciate young people's perspectives on these issues, nor the potential impact of SMAM on youth drinking cultures.
- 3) The CAP does not currently regulate UGC, which forms a substantial part of many SMAM and frequently reinforces the culture of heavy drinking. A recent ruling by the Australian Advertising Standards Bureau stated that alcohol brands' Facebook pages should be treated as marketing communication tools, and all contents should fall under the industry's self-regulatory code of ethics, including all UGC.

Current systems of regulation are reactive and seldom reflect young people's perspectives.

Professor Griffin will be supervising a 3-year PhD studentship on this topic from October 2014 based at the University of Bath and linked to the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies (UKCTAS). UKCTAS comprises 13 University teams working on tobacco and alcohol research funded by the UK Clinical Research Collaboration (see www.ukcats.ac.uk). The PhD will involve an extensive investigation of SMAM in relation to young people's uses of social media in their everyday drinking cultures.

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