

Institution: University of Birmingham
Unit of Assessment: C19 - Business and Management Studies
Title of case study: Influencing business policy towards young people's alcohol consumption
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Widespread concern about the effects of excess alcohol consumption by young people has been the focus of extensive national debate. The drinks industry has paid growing attention to these issues; corporate social responsibility measures by both individual companies and industry bodies show evidence of a more sophisticated appreciation of how marketing can be used to address the problem. This is evident in publications of the major drinks companies and the continual updating of recommendations to industry by the Portman Group. Findings from research into young people, alcohol consumption and social identity research have informed public, policy and industry debates and have shaped control measures, in particular by highlighting the social versus individual responsibility issues around so-called binge drinking. Professor Isabelle Szmigin of Birmingham Business School, a lead researcher on this project, has subsequently been directly involved in enhancing corporate social responsibility activities within the alcohol industry through industry and policy wide debates such as a St. George's House consultation on alcohol and has been appointed as one of nine members of the Portman Group Independent Complaints Panel, which adjudicates on complaints made under the industry Code of Practice on the marketing of alcoholic products in the UK.</p> <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>'The young people, alcohol consumption and social identity' project focused on 18 to 25 year olds of both sexes from a range of socio-economic and ethnic groups, using an innovative combination of qualitative research methods. The research team analysed a selected sample of 216 alcohol adverts aimed at young people shown during 2005-6 on TV, magazines and the internet, examining how particular drinks were represented. This was followed by 16 informal group discussions with 89 young adults in three geographical locations. Finally, five in-depth observational case studies of young people's drinking activities were carried out in the three geographical locations, followed by eight individual interviews.</p> <p>The research identified that advertising campaigns by the major drinks manufacturers represented young people's drinking as a source of pleasure, camaraderie, fun and adventure central to their social lives. The representation of young people's drinking in alcohol advertising had important resonances with participants' accounts of their social lives, in particular the significance of drinking for the formation of group identity. Participants discussed various strategies for managing (or attempting to manage) the imperative to drink to excess that characterised their social lives via a form of 'calculated hedonism'.</p> <p>A significant insight from the research was that both drinking and drinking stories played an important role in binding young people's social groups together. Their drinking stories involved cautionary tales of the dangers associated with drinking, such as loss of consciousness and loss of memory; adventure stories of fun, risk and excitement; and many 'funny stories' about the pleasures and perils of drinking. Participants' 'passing out stories' reflected a potential strategy for escaping the pressures and contradictions of existence in contemporary society.</p> <p>The research results show that there is a significant gap between government policy, health education initiatives and drinks industry messages about 'responsible drinking' and young people's drinking cultures. Health education initiatives often advocate 'safe' levels of alcohol consumption that participants viewed as laughably unrealistic. Participants did discuss the harms, risks and pleasures of drinking, but set firmly within a dominant culture of drinking to excess, a form of having 'fun' that was viewed as a vital part of young people's social lives. It was concluded that government policies around alcohol-related harm need to tackle issues of price, availability and the marketing and sale of increasingly strong drinks to young people, but also to engage with the central importance alcohol plays in young people's sense of group identity.</p>

The research was carried out between 2005 and 2007 by Professor Isabelle Szmigin as part of an ESRC project with colleagues at the University of Bath and Royal Holloway, London (Branded Consumption and Social Identification: Young People and Alcohol, Total award: £200,000). As co-investigator, Szmigin (Professor of Marketing, Birmingham Business School) managed the Birmingham RA and a placement student from Bath and all the Birmingham centred empirical research. She was involved in all the analysis and writing up.

3. References to the research

- R1) Hackley, C., Bengry-Howell, A., Griffin, C. Mistral, Szmigin, I., W. Tiwasakul, R. Young Adults and 'Binge' Drinking: A Bakhtinian Analysis, Journal of Marketing Management. Published online: 14 Nov 2012 [DOI:10.1080/0267257X.2012.729074]
- R2) Szmigin, I. Hackley, C. Bengry-Howell, A. Griffin, C. Mistral, W.(2011) 'Social Marketing in a Culture of Intoxication', European Journal of Marketing, 45, 5, 759-779 [DOI: 10.1108/03090561111120028]
- R3) Griffin, G. Szmigin, I., Bengry-Howell, A., Hackley, C., and Mistral, W. (2010) 'The Allure of Belonging: Young People's Drinking Practices and Collective Identification' in Identity in the 21st Century: New Trends in Changing Times ed M. Wetherall [available from HEI on request]
- R4) Griffin, C., Bengry-Howell, A., Hackley, C., Mistral, M. Szmigin, I.T. (2009). 'Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself': Loss of (self)-consciousness and loss of memory in young people's drinking narratives' Sociology, 43, 457-475.[DOI: 10.1177/0038038509103201][26 citations, as recorded on Scopus 23/07/13]
- R5) Hackley, C. Bengry-Howell, A. Griffin, C. and Szmigin, I. (2009). The UK Government's 'Safe, Sensible, Social' alcohol policy as discursive construction: Can it connect with local communities and young people? Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy on 'Community approaches to alcohol-related harm' 15, No. S1, 2008, 65-78 [available from HEI on request]
- R6) Szmigin, I., Griffin, C, Hackley, C. Bengry-Howell, A., Weale, L. Mistral, W. (2008) 'Reframing 'Binge Drinking' as Calculated Hedonism, Empirical Evidence from the UK' International Journal of Drug Policy, 19, 359-366. [DOI:10.1016/j.drugpo.2007.08.009][43 citations, as recorded on Scopus 23/07/13].

4. Details of the impact

Widespread concern about the effects of excess alcohol consumption by young people has been the focus of extensive public policy debate. The drinks industry has paid growing attention to these issues; corporate social responsibility measures by both individual companies and industry bodies show evidence of a more sophisticated appreciation of how marketing can be used to address the problem. The findings from Szmigin's research, and her active engagement with stakeholders on these issues, have helped shape these measures.

Central to this has been the researchers' argument that it is unproductive to represent excessive alcohol consumption as a matter solely of individual responsibility. This has led to initiatives e.g. the Government's public health 'responsibility deal' and the proposal for minimum pricing that shifts responsibility to producers. It has also informed approaches to communicating with young people through its identification of the overriding social aspect of alcohol consumption for them.

The findings from the research were publicised in two press releases, one in December 2007 and the second a year later (sources 1 and 2 below). The first of these was timed to coincide with the campaign by Diageo (the major UK drinks producer to encourage 'socially responsible drinking' (www.thechoiceisyours.com)), and the second was focused on broader concerns about excess consumption in the Christmas period. The 2007 press release, for instance, highlighted that some anti-drinking advertising campaigns may be misconceived because they played on the entertaining 'drinking stories' that young people use to mark their social identity, as indicated by the project's research findings, with Diageo's campaign specifically mentioned as failing to take this aspect into account.

Both press releases generated extensive media interest and led, in 2008, to an ongoing dialogue

with members of Diageo's UK Social Responsibility team to discuss implications for their marketing strategies. Subsequently, over the 2008 Christmas period, Szmigin appeared on BBC Television Breakfast News, BBC News 24, and Radio Five Live talking about binge drinking (source 3).

The findings have also informed political debate. In 2011, Szmigin was invited by 'The New Statesman' to speak at a Liberal Democrat Fringe meeting on 'Can the UK ever be a nation of responsible drinkers' alongside MPs, the Chair of the Portman Group and a representative from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The research findings were also quoted in written evidence discussing the effectiveness of government guidelines and marketing campaign's in influencing young people's behaviour to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee during its review of Alcohol Guidelines in 2011 (EV W28 in source 4).

The 2009 Joseph Rowntree Foundation review of alcohol prevention measures also drew on the research findings, noting the importance of recognising that young people do not see themselves in the way that other people see them (e.g. as binge drinkers), reflecting the findings of the research study. As a result, the report recommended that 'The task is to *replace the cultural norm* of (and therefore the resulting peer support for) bingeing and other forms of drinking dangerously, with positive parental role models for sensible alcohol consumption' (source 5, p.6).

In July 2012 Szmigin was appointed to the Portman Group Independent Complaints Panel, which is chaired currently by under the chairmanship of Sir Martin Narey. The Panel adjudicates on complaints made under the Code of Practice on the Naming, Packaging and Promotion of Alcoholic drinks and is also involved in developing regulation and policy for the drinks industry. The Portman Group is of considerable significance to the industry as its Code of Practice applies to all pre-packaged alcohol sold or marketed in the UK and is designed to ensure alcohol is marketed responsibly in the UK. Thus, she has become directly engaged with a professional industry body that has the power to make regulation on particular areas of drinks marketing, notably sponsorship, promotions with retailers and packaging. At the time of her appointment, the then chair, Sir Richard Tilt noted that "*Isabelle and [Professor Roy Light] will bring a great depth of experience to the Independent Complaints Panel in terms of their research and legal backgrounds. Panel members play a key role in upholding the strict standards that are set for alcohol marketing in the UK and it is important that we have a diverse membership to consider complaints about irresponsible alcohol marketing and promotions*" (source 6).

Further influence was achieved through Szmigin's participation in November 2012 in an invitation-only St. George's House consultation event, *Alcohol: Is the UK on the Right Track?* This explored how well the UK was progressing in minimising the adverse consequences of alcohol consumption whilst also supporting the commercial and economic contribution of the industry. The report on the consultation, reflecting the input of Szmigin's research, said that participants recognised the importance of addressing the impact of consumption on young people, and that tailored solutions were needed to change the behaviour of this (and other) specific groups (source 7, pp 5-6). Szmigin was one of only two academics invited to attend this event; other attendees included the Chief Executive of Portman Group, the Chief Executive of Wine and Spirit Trade Association, Chief Executive Office of Marston's, Head of Corporate Affairs at Wm. Morrison Supermarkets, the Director of Public Affairs at the Advertising Association, Director, Centre of Public Health, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, Director of Regulation and Enforcement at Birmingham City Council, and the Chief Executive of the British Beer and Pub Association.

Szmigin has subsequently participated in the ongoing public and political debate about the value of minimum pricing of alcohol. Since 2010 she has been on Radio 4, Radio 5, Radio Wales, Radio West Midlands and Radio Hereford and Worcester to discuss minimum pricing and excessive alcohol consumption. Following the government's decision not to go ahead with minimum alcohol pricing, and reflecting the research's conclusions that an onus on individual responsibility would not deal with the problem of alcohol and young people, Professor Szmigin was invited to write a comment piece for *The Guardian*, published on 13th March 2013 which generated 286 comments on the newspaper website (source 8). The research manager of Alcohol Research UK commented '*It's exactly the kind of balanced analysis that is completely missing most of the time*' (source 9).

Impact case study (REF3b)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. <http://www.bath.ac.uk/news/archive/2007/12/10/antidrinkingsads.html>
2. <http://www.politics.co.uk/opinion-formers/economic-social-research-council-esrc/article/esrc-t-is-the-season-to-be-jolly>
3. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7132749.stm> and
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7801640.stm>; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/antidrink-ads-waste-millions-213853.html> ;
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/3981161/Drunken-celebrities-are-poor-role-models.html>
4. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmsctech/1536/1536vw.pdf>, Ev
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5. <http://www.irf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/alcohol-prevention-progs-parttwo.pdf>
6. <http://www.thedrinksbusiness.com/2012/08/two-new-members-appointed-to-independent-complaints-panel/>
7. <http://www.stgeorghouse.org/consultations/social-and-ethical-consultations/recent-consultations/alcohol-is-the-uk-on-the-right-track>
8. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/13/alcohol-minimum-pricing-could-work-government-wrong>
9. Email from Research Manager, Alcohol Research UK 13th March 2013