

POLICY

Everyday, Everywhere: Alcohol Marketing and Social Media—Current Trends

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Abstract — **Aims:** To provide a snapshot content analysis of social media marketing among leading alcohol brands in the UK, and to outline the implications for both regulatory policies and further research. **Methods:** Using screengrab technology, the complete Facebook walls and Twitter timelines for 12 leading UK alcohol brands in November 2011 were captured and archived. A total of 701 brand-authored posts were identified and categorized using a thematic coding frame. Key strategic trends were identified and analysed in the light of contextual research into recent developments in marketing practice within the alcohol industry. **Results:** A number of dominating trends were identified. These included the use of real-world tie-ins, interactive games, competitions and time-specific suggestions to drink. These methods reflect a strategy of branded conversation-stimulus which is favoured by social media marketing agencies. **Conclusion:** A number of distinct marketing methods are deployed by alcohol brands when using social media. These may undermine policies which seek to change social norms around drinking, especially the normalization of daily consumption. Social media marketing also raises questions regarding the efficacy of reactive regulatory frameworks. Further research into both the nature and impact of alcohol marketing on social media is needed.

INTRODUCTION—RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Recently, alcohol researchers have started to consider digital marketing, arguing it is ‘critically important that we understand the dimensions and implications of [this] new marketing paradigm’ (Chester *et al.*, 2010: 3; see also Jones and Jernigan, 2010: 4; Gordon *et al.*, 2010: 477). The bulk of published research focuses on conventional ‘dotcom’ websites (e.g. Center on Alcohol Marketing, 2004; Hastings, 2009), while research into marketing on social media remains ‘in its infancy’ (Leyshon, 2011: 9). However, the emergence of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter has fundamentally changed the nature of digital marketing. Whereas ‘dotcom’ sites allow some interactivity, they remain primarily unidirectional; social media marketing, by contrast, hinges on the promotion of interaction and conversation among potential consumers.

Alcohol companies have responded to the rise of social media by repositioning their marketing focus. In January 2011, Bacardi announced it would ‘shift up to 90% of its digital spend to Facebook as it no longer deems dotcom sites relevant’ (Shearman, 2011). In 2011, the Head of Digital at Diageo stated that ‘the days of lavish £200,000 websites are over’, and later that year Diageo announced plans to ‘step up their multi-million dollar partnership with Facebook’, reporting that their Facebook fan base had increased from three and a half to 12 million in the preceding year (Derrick, 2011; Diageo, 2011a). By September 2011, alcohol brands had the third highest consumer ‘engagement rate’ on Facebook after automobiles and retail (Socialbakers, 2011a). Furthermore, between March and September 2011 ‘likes’ for the Smirnoff GB page increased by 39.18% to over 629,000, while ‘likes’ for the global Bacardi page increased by 289% to 1,889,789 (Socialbakers, 2011b).

Advertising regulators have also responded to these changes. In March 2011, the UK Committee on Advertising Practice (CAP, 2011) extended its regulations to cover digital communications, and in September 2011, the UK drinks

industry self-regulator, the Portman Group, released a consultation on its marketing Code of Practice, which included proposals to tighten existing guidelines on social media communications (Portman Group, 2009, 2011). In the same month, the American spirits industry self-regulator, DISCUS, released an updated code of practice for digital marketing (DISCUS, 2011). These codes focus on preventing brands from targeting underage drinkers (Portman Group, 2009: Codes 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3), while requiring better moderation of user-generated material that potentially breaches existing regulations (Portman Group, 2009: Code 2.4). As such, they seek to better apply existing regulations to the online environment, rather than addressing unique features of social media that present new challenges. This paper considers what these new challenges may be and whether the current regulatory system is able to address them effectively.

METHODS

Research on social media marketing remains in a developmental stage. While a number of mainstream publications outline key principles (e.g. Weinberg, 2009; Zarrella, 2009; Safko, 2010), academic analyses of content remain rare (Thoring, 2011). Existing studies analyse social media marketing in local television (Greer and Ferguson, 2011), non-profit organizations (Waters *et al.*, 2009), health promotion (Gold *et al.*, 2011) and, in one case, regional wineries (Thach, 2009). Elsewhere, content analysis is used to study user-generated material on patient blogs (Shah and Robinson, 2011), eating disorder sites (Juarascio *et al.*, 2010), political Facebook sites (Woolley *et al.*, 2010) and alcohol-related social network sites (Griffiths and Casswell, 2010). This study takes a novel approach in applying systematic content analysis to industry (as opposed to user)-generated social media marketing material—though Thoring (2011) attempts something comparable in her study of Twitter use by UK trade publishers.

Using the most recent Nielsen retail data, the top three UK brands in four alcohol categories were selected for analysis (Nielsen, 2011). Standard screen capture technology (Mac OSX Leopard) was used to take snapshots of the complete Facebook walls and Twitter timelines of those brands for the period 1–30th November 2011. The snapshots were saved as .jpg files and archived, providing a full, durable, real-time record of all content over the sample period. The number of ‘likes’ (Facebook) and ‘followers’ (Twitter) for each brand was audited on 23 November. These give the best available indication of how many potential consumers have elected to let marketing content be ‘pushed’ onto their personal wall and timelines. However, it should be noted that the actual reach of social media is wider than the range of ‘active’ users captured in the number of ‘likes’ or followers (since users may look at a page or timeline without actively liking or following it) Table 1.

While user-generated content is a defining feature of social media, this study is concerned with brand-authored marketing communications. Therefore, only brand-authored wall posts were collated, and fan posts were excluded. Similarly, only ‘tweets’ authored by the brand were collated, along with ‘retweets’ which represented an explicit brand endorsement of the content of the original message. @replies and @messages were not included as these would only have appeared in the timelines of some brand followers. A total of 701 brand-authored posts and tweets were collected and categorized over the period. User-generated content on Facebook has been discussed in some research studies (e.g. Nicholls, 2009; Hastings *et al.*, 2010; Atkinson *et al.*, 2011); however, because Twitter raises distinct, and as yet un researched, issues regarding user-generated content, a secondary study of tweets containing Smirnoff and Bacardi ‘hashtags’ was carried out. This covered one week (14–21 November 2011) and yielded 903 tweets, of which 583 English-language tweets were collated. [*Explanatory note:* A ‘retweet’ is a tweet that is forwarded by someone other than the author to their entire follower list. @replies and @messages are tweets directed at specific followers beginning with @ followed by the username of the intended recipient. @replies are semi-public: they can also be seen anyone following both the author and recipient of the message. Hashtags allow terms within tweets to be searched in unique timelines. For instance, a tweet containing the hashtag #smirnoff will appear in a timeline with all other tweets containing the same hashtag. This timeline can be viewed by entering #smirnoff in the Twitter search box].

Adapting methods drawn from conventional media content analysis, the data were coded according to a simple, thematic coding frame. Coding categories were identified after tracking content on selected sites over a 6-week period prior to November 2011 and specifying key themes. Each message was assigned to a single thematic category containing subsidiary variables: e.g. the category ‘promotional events’ contained the variables ‘prior information about event’; ‘ticket competition’; ‘link to music/video associated with event’; ‘post-event comments’ and ‘link to post-event image/video’. Totals were collected for both individual variables and theme categories.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed clear patterns in brand strategies. Most prominent were real-world tie-ins; interactive games; sponsored online events and invitations to drink. These will be described using selected examples before a discussion of marketing strategies, regulation and implications for future research.

Real-world tie-ins: the Nightlife Exchange Project

‘Real-world tie-in’ refers to an actual branded event (club night, sporting event etc.) promoted wholly or in part via social media. The most prominent of these was the Smirnoff ‘Nightlife Exchange Project’ (hereafter ‘NEP’). The NEP involves themed nightclub events across the globe. These are promoted via both social and conventional media channels and represent the biggest marketing outlay in the history of Smirnoff’s parent company, Diageo (Sweeney, 2010). During the period of this study, an NEP event took place in London. Of 35 posts on the Smirnoff GB Facebook wall, 24 were either pre-event announcements and links to related Youtube videos, or post-event photos and videos documenting the party. At the event, attendees received key rings allowing them to upload photos to Facebook, many of which appeared on the Smirnoff GB Facebook photo album in the following days. This blurred the distinction between user-generated material and brand promotion as fan photos mixed with official images and videos. On Twitter, Smirnoff actively encouraged followers who had attended to share images, posting tweets such as ‘Were you at the Nightlife Exchange? We want #stories. We want #pictures. Go!’ (14th) and ‘As the

Table 1. Leading UK alcohol brands social media presence: November 2011

Brand	Category	Rank	Facebook	Fb likes	Fb wall posts	Twitter	Followers	Tweets
WKD	RTD	1	Y	175,895	28	N	—	—
Smirnoff	RTD	2	Y	629,015	35	Y	22,039	46
Bacardi	RTD	3	Y	1,892,575	10	Y	27,078	120
Strongbow	Cider	1	Y	143,712	42	N	—	—
Magners	Cider	2	Y	101,624	14	Y	3669	19
Bulmers	Cider	3	Y	62,167	15	Y	2211	0
Blossom Hill	Light wine	1	Y	72,377	27	N	—	—
Hardys	Light wine	2	Y	1290	20	N	—	—
Echo Falls	Light wine	3	Y	21,405	26	N	—	—
Stella Artois	Beer	1	Y	112,894	24	Protected ^a	3412	—
Foster’s	Beer	2	Y	113,079	26	Y	3406	234
Carling	Beer	3	Y	60,089	15	N	—	—

^aThe Stella Artois Twitter feed is only visible to people who have a request to follow approved. However, the author received no response to a follow request, and the feed appears to be dormant.

#SmirnoffXChange wraps up can you guess what we want? Hint: PHOTOS.’ (13th) (A single number given in brackets following a cited post is the day in November 2011 on which it appeared. Hashtags in the original tweets have been retained. Numbers in brackets separated by a forward slash represent the number of relevant posts out of the total on the wall for the month of November 2011.).

The NEP represents a sophisticated integration of real-world and online activity: not only was the branded event promoted online, but subsequent photos and user comments depicted Smirnoff as intrinsic to the success of the event. As discussed below, this arguably contravenes a regulatory code (BCAP 19.4; CAP 18.3) banning the suggestion that ‘the success of a social occasion depends on the presence or consumption of alcohol’ (Committee on Advertising Practice, 2010). In terms of social media marketing strategies, however, what matters is that the event (and the promotional media activities surrounding the event—both online and traditional) generated social media content which potentially reinforced brand identity. Here, the expected relationship between media promotion and real-world events is reversed: rather than media simply promoting attendance, attendance served to provide material for the social media site.

The Smirnoff NEP represented the most sophisticated social media/real-world tie-in; however, other brands engaged in more conventional event sponsorship. WKD ran a competition for tickets to a sponsored darts event (the Grand Slam of Darts) and the Together Winter music festival, while around half Echo Falls wall posts (14/26) advertised a sponsored Clothes Show Live event. However, in both cases posts only contained announcements and ticket competitions. These represent extensions of conventional event promotion, albeit exploiting the potential of social media for daily reminders, while the integrated cross-media strategy of the NEP marks a step-change in techniques.

Interactive games: the ‘Construction Experiment’ and the ‘Last Word’

Facebook surveys and quizzes were commonplace, especially among wine brands. Over a third of Blossom Hill wall posts contained questions such ‘Which of our reds is your favourite?’ (19th) and ‘If you were a Blossom Hill wine, which would you be?’ (29th). Quizzes also accounted for a substantial number (7/17) of Hardy’s Facebook posts. Interactive games played a substantial role in the Facebook activities of two cider brands—Bulmers and Magners. Bulmers ran a daily ‘Construction Experiment’ inviting fans to upload photos of comical, homemade objects as well as suggesting humorously experimental things to do (such as putting soap in a microwave) and inviting comments on the results. ‘Experiment’ posts accounted for almost all (13/15) of Bulmers wall posts. Strongbow ran a ‘Last Word’ competition inviting fans to suggest alternative endings to a commercial video. Each weekday, a Youtube link to the winning entry was uploaded. ‘Last Word’ updates accounted for the majority (30/42) of Strongbow wall posts.

Six brands used giveaways and competitions of some form. These included free haircuts (Blossom Hill); drinking glasses (Stella Artois); music compilations (Stella Artois) and bottles of wine (Echo Falls) as well as tickets to sponsored wine-tasting events (Hardys); nightclub events

(Smirnoff); music and sporting events (WKD) and fashion shows (Echo Falls). Giveaways are by no means unique to social media environments; however, while giveaways often require purchases, no purchase was necessary in any of these cases. Instead, the goal was to encourage users to ‘like’ the brand page and to stimulate user activity on the wall.

Sponsored online events: ‘Foster’s Funnies’

Foster’s sponsor a range of television and live comedy, and ‘Foster’s Funnies’ extends this into the social media arena through resurrecting cult shows and characters. In November 2011, exclusive new episodes of the popular sketch show, *The Fast Show*, were released on Youtube and most Foster’s wall posts (16/26) were either links to, announcements for or invitations to comment on these.

The @fostersfunny Twitter feed promotes the Youtube series and produced an average of just below eight tweets per day. From 8 November onwards, all but two tweets were either links to ‘Fast Show’ clips or comments on sketches and characters. While this was, by some distance, the most active social media feed, over the whole period no tweets mentioned Foster’s lager, drinking or alcohol. Unlike the Foster’s Facebook page, which was interspersed with references to drinking, the @fostersfunnies timeline was solely directed towards stimulating online conversations about comedy, but within a branded environment. However, users following links back to the main Foster’s website could also watch videos of conventional Foster’s lager adverts.

Stella Artois adopted a comparable technique on its Facebook page. Five links were uploaded to humorous new adverts for Stella Cidre, and invited comments. This stimulated humorous conversations while raising awareness of (and garnering audience reactions to) new advertising material. As with the Strongbow ‘Last Word’ competition, it encouraged repeat viewings of otherwise conventional adverts and promoted online conversations about brand products.

Encouragement to drink

Post proposing drinks appeared regularly. Many of these were day-specific: linking consumption to the weekend, but also linking brands to early and mid-week consumption. Such posts were most common on Friday:

- (1) Hit LIKE if you’re ready to break the seal on the first Fosters of the weekend (Foster’s: Facebook, 4th).
- (2) Which of the Magners range will you be enjoying this weekend? (Magners: Facebook, 11th).
- (3) It’s Friday! Like this update if you’ll be having a Carling tonight—best way to start the weekend (Carling: Facebook, 11th).
- (4) There’s no better time than Friday afternoon Bowtime (Strongbow: Facebook, 11th).
- (5) It’s Friday which means the weekend is almost upon us. What have you got planned? We hope it includes a pint of #Magners or two (Magners: Twitter, 11th).
- (6) Raise your glass to the start of the weekend (Bacardi, Facebook, 10th).

While the promotion of weekend drinking is, to some degree, unremarkable, there was also a trend among some

brands to associate consumption with other weekdays. One Smirnoff tweet read ‘Sunday’s fun day’. Not that any day isn’t fun day with #smirnoff (20th). Bacardi made regular references to ‘Mojito Monday’ [e.g. Waiting for the weekend for a mojito? We had one Monday! #mojitomondays (10th)] and Foster’s used its Facebook wall to advertise a ‘Monday Club’ featuring discount drinks selected outlets. Bacardi used the phrase ‘hump day’ (i.e. Wednesday) in tweets such as Reward yourself for cresting hump day with a Bacardi cocktail! (23rd) and Happy hump day! (16th). Strongbow uploaded one wall post stating that Hitting the mid-point of the working week can only mean one thing (9th) above a photograph containing the word ‘Bowtime’. As with weekend drinking, these messages were ‘pushed’ in real-time, appearing on the day to which they referred.

Responsible drinking

No Facebook post explicitly recommended moderate or responsible drinking. Only two brands—WKD and Foster’s—included a permanent responsible drinking message with a live link to the Drinkaware website on their wall or launch page. Stella Artois and Bacardi had links to ‘house rules’ pages on their walls, which mentioned—among other things—rules against depicting under-25’s in photographs; others, such as Carling, provided a link to Drinkaware on separate ‘About’ pages. However, permanent links to responsible drinking guidelines or resources were notable by their absence on most Facebook walls.

Bacardi operated the separate responsible drinking Facebook site ‘Champions Drink Responsibly’, and in November 2011, launched an interactive tennis game featuring one of Bacardi’s responsible drinking ‘champions’ Rafael Nadal. Surprisingly, while the game was promoted strongly on the ‘Champions Drink Responsibly’ wall, no mention of the launch appeared on either the main Bacardi Facebook wall or the official Twitter feed. In the period of this study, Bacardi uploaded six responsible drinking tweets to their Twitter feed and Smirnoff uploaded one tweet reminding drinkers to get home safely. However, Bacardi’s responsible drinking tweets appeared to bear out claims that brand-sponsored responsible drinking messages can be ‘strategically ambiguous’ (Smith *et al.*, 2006). One called for followers to ‘Celebrate #mojitomondays responsibly’ (22nd)—following two prior tweets reading ‘Who is ready for Mojitos? #mojitomondays’ (22nd) and ‘It’s never too cold for a Mojito. Happy #mojitomondays!’ (22nd). The simultaneous encouragement of moderation and early-weekday spirits consumption could be considered a somewhat mixed message.

DISCUSSION

The association of brands with special events and occasions (e.g. NEP), with humour (e.g. Foster’s Funnies’) or with respite from work (e.g. Strongbow’s ‘Bowtime’ slogan) are familiar features of alcohol marketing across the board, as is the sponsorship of music or sporting events. However, social media marketing adds a new dimension: not only does it allow marketers to stimulate conversations about brands, it allows them to observe, analyse and direct those conversations in real-time. It allows marketers to embed brand-related

activities in the routines of social media engagement for large numbers of people, and to use social media to encourage a more routine approach to alcohol consumption.

Conversations about alcohol

Evidence that exposure to alcohol marketing increases consumption is mounting (Anderson *et al.*, 2009; Smith and Foxcroft, 2009). However, this is not a simple dose–response relationship (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011: 9), but one in which contextual factors impact on behaviour, including perceived social norms and levels of active engagement with marketing stimuli. The marketing industry has always sought to develop the right ‘marketing mix’ to stimulate active engagement in any given product or brand. Social media presents a distinct opportunity in this regard. In particular, it has facilitated ‘social influence marketing’, in which ‘conversations about brands, products and services are increasingly woven into the interactions among the users of social networks’ (Chester *et al.*, 2010: 6).

According to a key figure in the development of Diageo’s social media strategy, the goal of social media marketing is to ‘observe, facilitate and participate’ in ‘positive conversations about the brand’ (Van Bellegham, 2011). Because the goal is to encourage brand-centric conversations more broadly, social media messages do not need to refer directly to alcohol consumption; indeed, less than 1 in 10 of all wall posts (23/282) and under a quarter of all tweets (42/189) explicitly suggested consuming alcohol. Conversations can be about alcohol generally, about the brand specifically or about other subjects—so long as they occur in a branded online environment.

Facebook facilitates branded conversation but also, crucially, provides marketers with access to the profile data of users who ‘like’ pages. The consumer analytics provided by Facebook are critical to designing social media marketing strategies on the basis of this. Indeed, Diageo have stipulated that future social media campaigns must begin with analyses of known fan profile data, as opposed to more impressionistic consumer segmentation used in conventional marketing (Van Bellegham, 2011). In the press release announcing their multimillion dollar deal with Facebook, Diageo explained that it would ‘work closely with Facebook teams from concept development, through campaign development to execution’ in order to maximize its marketing impact (Diageo, 2011a). Achieving these outcomes requires extending the range of conversational subjects with which the brand is associated and developing interactive material that draws users back to brand pages—in addition to product promotion and carefully timed exhortations to drink.

Brand-facilitated conversations can also reinforce conventional advertising. Strongbow’s ‘Last Word’ competition sought to stimulate interest in a new screen advert, as did Stella Artois’ invitation to comment on Cidre adverts. Furthermore, social media can provide quantifiable measures of audience response to campaigns: among tweets with the #smirnoff hashtag, around one quarter (86/320) were direct comments on marketing promotions. While marketers are less able to access user profile data on Twitter than on Facebook, such material still provides a source of audience response data at little or no cost to campaign agencies.

Routinization

Traditional notions of celebration play a key role in social media marketing: the NEP, for instance, associates Smirnoff vodka with a one-off special occasion. However, tweets such as ‘Are you celebrating w/ Smirnoff today? Post your photo with the tag #smirnoff’ (11), while raising the profile of the #smirnoff hashtag and encouraging user-generated content, also unmoor the word ‘celebrate’ from any specific meaning: there is no hint what is being celebrated, simply that it may involve vodka. Furthermore, the call by Bacardi to ‘celebrate Mojito Monday responsibly’ suggests an attempt to not only reinforce the association between alcohol and celebration, but to routinize it to the extent that even Mondays are considered worthy of a toast. This desire to routinize celebration—while positing celebration as intrinsically tied to alcohol—is not simply a feature of tweets and wall posts, but headline brand statements—most obviously the current brand slogan of Smirnoff’s parent company, Diageo: ‘Celebrating life: everyday, everywhere’. If ‘celebrating life’ is intended to connote drinking Diageo products (which it surely must be), then the goal of that slogan is to imply consuming alcohol is both special and routine. Routinizing consumption, while maintaining connotations of celebration *and* leisure, is a marketing aspiration that social media is particularly well-equipped to support.

Much research identifies the ‘normalizing’ power of media representations as a key concern. Jernigan and O’Hara (2004: 631) argue that digital alcohol marketing strategies ‘have the potential to embed brands in the lives and lifestyles of consumers, creating an intimate relationship and sense of kinship between the brand and user.’ A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation identifies the ‘normalization of alcohol and drinking’ as a key impact of both television and internet representations (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011: 6–7). Another recent study has argued that ‘a cumulative effect of [user-generated depictions of drinking] is a contribution to the ‘normalization’ of alcohol consumption’ (Leyshon, 2011: 4). The British Medical Association has argued that contemporary marketing strategies mean ‘young people in the UK are growing up in an excessively pro-alcohol real and virtual environment’ (2009: 21; see also Montonen, 1996: 70; Lyons *et al.*, 2006; Gunter *et al.*, 2010: 30). In early 2012, the Parliamentary Science and Technology Committee called for safe drinking guidelines to more explicitly tackle the normalization of daily drinking (Science and Technology Committee, 2012).

This study suggests alcohol social media marketing strives to achieve the opposite. Conversation-generating strategies seek to embed alcohol-branded activities in the daily lives of site fans and followers. To this extent, they reinforce alcohol as an intrinsic element of daily norms. While such reinforcement strategies are designed to promote brand loyalty, they raise broader questions about the dynamics of drinking cultures. The role of alcohol marketing in the cultural reinforcement of social norms has been identified as a critical area for further study (Meier, 2010). Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that a key predictor of consumption is the perception that friends drink routinely (Atkinson *et al.*, 2011). Social media marketing can both reinforce social norms and over-represent pro-alcohol attitudes among fans, followers and their peers. Therefore, whatever the impact on brand-

specific sales, it highlights challenges faced by those engaged in health promotion. The emergence of ‘intoxicogenic digital spaces’ has been identified as a key effect of some user-generated social media activity (Griffiths and Casswell, 2010); this study suggests that, even where intoxication is not promoted, social media marketing seeks to embed alcohol in the conversations and daily routines of consumers, thereby further establishing alcohol as a daily norm as well as a marker of special occasions.

Alcohol health campaigners have called for a greater use of digital communications to challenge social norms around alcohol, and the industry-funded responsible drinking body Drinkaware has reported success in attracting the public to its online services (Drinkaware, 2010). There is ongoing debate regarding the role of industry in funding bodies such as Drinkaware (e.g. Hastings and Angus, 2011), but that is beyond the scope of this paper. In 2011, the UK Department of Health identified changing social norms as key to reducing alcohol-related harm, and in February 2012, launched a campaign warning of the health risks associated with daily drinking (Department of Health, 2010, 2012). However, social marketing campaigns seeking to de-normalize consumption compete with highly developed social media campaigns on the part of alcohol brands whose goal is to achieve precisely the opposite (and within which responsible drinking messages remain both limited and ambiguous). In the face of such well-financed, globalized and highly sophisticated campaigns, efforts to de-normalize routine consumption face significant challenges.

Regulation

The self-regulation of alcohol marketing has previously been described by the British Medical Association as ‘entirely inadequate’ (BMA, 2009: 25; see also Hastings *et al.*, 2010). The issue of user-generated content undoubtedly raises a host of problems, which are only partially addressed by the stipulations in the Portman and DISCUS codes that brands should regularly monitor material on the official sites (Portman Group, 2009; DISCUS, 2011). While issues regarding user-generated content are beyond the scope of this paper, brand-authored social media marketing presents significant challenges to existing regulatory codes. Social media communications are dynamic and rapid, while existing regulatory frameworks are reactive—relying on public complaints and subsequent adjudications. This system, it has been argued, already struggles to keep pace with conventional advertising (Baggott, 2006: 33). This is exacerbated in an environment where messages are ephemeral and their impact period is a matter of hours and days, rather than weeks. For instance, existing codes stipulate that marketing cannot suggest alcohol is intrinsic to the success of a social event, nor can it show drinkers who appear to be 25 or under (BCAP 19.17/CAP 18.16)—though Hastings (2009: 2) reports that internal drinks industry documents are ‘full of references’ to brands seeking to link their products to social success without explicitly violating this code. In the days following the London NEP, 176 images of the event appeared on the Smirnoff GB Facebook photo album, of which 33 showed participants drinking or holding drinks, 11 showed drinks being served and 8 simply showed cocktails or bottles of Smirnoff. An official video was posted to Youtube

documenting the event, interspersed with images of Smirnoff bottles and cocktails. The video and photographs appeared to position Smirnoff as intrinsic to the success of a social event; however, adjudicating whether this amounted to a code violation would take far longer than the brief period during which the video had its primary impact.

Claiming alcohol is intrinsic to the success of a social event is not proscribed under either the Portman Group Code of Practice or the Diageo code on marketing. However, all statutory and self-regulatory codes do have explicit stipulations against targeting underage drinkers. Through its 'manage permissions' setting for business sites, Facebook provides an 'alcohol-related' restriction which prevents access to users under the legal drinking age according to country (i.e. the restriction differs depending on the location of the person attempting to access the page). Because there is limited value in misrepresenting one's real age on Facebook, such safeguards are likely to be more effective than the age-affirmation pages used on conventional websites. By contrast, Twitter has no means of age-verifying access to timelines. Some brands (e.g. Bacardi and Foster's) include notices on their timeline reminding followers they should be over 21, but there is no way of enforcing this. Even where access is age-controlled, it remains difficult to enforce regulations when photos of sponsored events are uploaded in significant numbers to Facebook pages. Such moderation as can be applied to Facebook is, however, impossible where Twitter users upload photos of themselves using an alcohol brand hashtag.

The scope of existing self-regulatory codes means social media alcohol marketing can achieve many of its goals without risking violations. Where the goal is to embed awareness of brands in everyday life, this can be achieved by developing conversations that do not explicitly reference drinking, much less drunkenness. Where the goal is to associate a brand with environments (such as nightclubs) where drunkenness is generally normalized, the idea of intoxication is easily sublimated into the language (and images) of 'partying' or 'celebration', while explicit references to drunkenness can be left to user-generated material on non-official pages. Furthermore, where existing codes are potentially violated, the slow process of complaint and adjudication means that material would be removed long after the intended impact has been achieved.

All the major alcohol producers have active Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes which outline responsible drinking targets. Many cite financial support for organizations such as Drinkaware as well as initiatives such as Diageo's DrinkIQ, Anheuser-Busch's 'Good Sport' and Bacardi's 'Champions Drink Responsibly' programmes (Bacardi, 2010; Anheuser-Busch, 2011; Diageo, 2011b). CSR statements tend to identify minority alcohol misuse as both a significant social concern and something that is, as Diageo put it, 'damaging to our reputation and that of our brands' (Diageo, 2011b: 17). Bacardi's claim that 'we are not in the business of promoting volume consumption' (Bacardi, 2010: 11) also reflects an assertion common in CSR documentation. The findings of this research do not point to an explicit contravention of these claims: there is no explicit promotion of harmful drinking and it is clear that key businesses contribute substantial sums to Drinkaware and other organizations with a similar remit. Responsible drinking messages appear in social media marketing communications—though these tend to be very sporadic, sometimes ambivalent and

rarely foregrounded. The key question is whether the use of marketing to vigorously promote alcohol as an everyday norm, and as intrinsic to the celebration of occasions ranging from global party events to surviving 'hump day', supports or undermines the desire expressed in all CSR statements to tackle problematic consumption.

These challenges raise the question of whether self-regulatory regimes developed in the era of conventional marketing can effectively regulate social media marketing or prevent it from undermining campaigns to shift social norms. In the UK, there have been calls for a complete ban on social media marketing for alcohol (e.g. Hastings *et al.*, 2010: 6; Leyshon, 2011: 5). Given the international nature of social media platforms, such a ban would be difficult to enforce and could have no effect on non-official sites or public activity on Twitter. However, if consensus were to emerge that existing regulations are unable to prevent social media alcohol marketing from contributing to an 'excessively pro-alcohol real and virtual environment' then a ban may become a politically viable alternative.

Future research

Alcohol marketing has only very recently concentrated its efforts on social media, and there is a clear need for further research in this area—both regarding the nature of brand-authored material and the role of user-generated content in reinforcing both particular patterns of consumption and ideas about norms of behaviour around alcohol. This study demonstrates that social media communications are amenable to methods drawn from conventional media content analysis. It also points to some key areas for further analysis: brand strategies for harnessing user-generated content; the interweaving of social media and real-world promotional activities; the limitations of current regulatory systems and—perhaps most critically—the means by which conversations about, and the consumption of, alcohol are more effectively folded into everyday life through social media communications. Further research may also seek to ascertain whether and how user-generated material responds to cues in brand-authored marketing.

Advertising operates in a wider culture and plays only a partial role in the promotion of consumption patterns within that broader cultural context (Advertising Standards Agency, 2005:5; Ofcom, 2007: 18). However, social media goes further than any previous communications platform in blurring the boundaries between unidirectional advertising messages, consumer interaction and broader social activities. With alcohol brands investing heavily in the opportunities opened up by social media, it is important that research methods are developed which facilitate further analysis of these techniques.

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