

Alcohol marketing and young people

Dr. Richard Purves, University of Stirling

**SHAAP/SARN 'Alcohol Occasional' Seminar
Thursday, 26th June 2014, The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh**

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) are proud to support the lunchtime 'Alcohol Occasional' seminars which showcase new and innovative research on alcohol use. All of the seminars are run in conjunction with the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. These events provide the chance for researchers, practitioners and policy makers and members of the public to hear about new alcohol related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The current theme for the seminars is "Alcohol and Young People". Briefing papers, including this one, aim to capture the main themes and to communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is fully responsible for the contents, which are our interpretation.

Purves opened by placing the Alcohol marketing and young people research within the context of a broader work programme at the Institute for Social Marketing (ISM) at the University of Stirling. The research, which is still in an exploratory phase, has been funded by Alcohol Research UK.

Purves' study has two stages: the first consisted of focus-group work with participants aged between 14 and 17, while the second phase involved a 'netnography' to identify, observe and analyse online communications regarding alcohol products on social media pages of certain brands. Research participants were young

people who were already consumers of alcohol.

Mentioning that previous studies had suggested that exposure to alcohol marketing is a determinant element in drinking uptake and frequency, Purves argued that the research is also important, because alcohol use can aggravate matters that are already problematic for young people, such as poor educational performance and teenage pregnancy.

While substantial academic investigation has already been carried out on more traditional forms of alcohol advertising, Purves explained, researchers need to keep pace with an ever-changing, multi-platform marketing environment. He illustrated this with the case of adverts on Facebook, which is predominantly used by younger people. He argued that, although the adverts ought to be targeting only adults, they are being seen by minors, such as the study participants.

For the study, he said, packaging, labelling and branding of alcohol products are deemed to be of special concern, when they have been specifically created to be shown online, where they will reach a large proportion of under-age consumers. Explaining that the study is also attempting to provide insights into the ways in which alcohol advertisers have been adopting marketing strategies that encourage an online engagement with different brands,

Purves' presentation included an advertisement for the FA Cup.

The advertisement showed young men passing to each other a beer can that had an animated feature, which was only visible with the help of an app. In the add, the young men take pictures of each other, and then share the pictures, where they appear to be holding the Cup, online with other friends. Other adverts shown in the presentation included those which promoted the consumption of drinks on special days. For example, for Pancake Day, advertisers suggested that alcoholic drinks could be added to pouring-sauce recipes. Purves' presentation also included examples of how alcohol promoters engage young people in online prize competitions, to discuss football, or to undertake market research for example about alcohol availability.

The drinks advertised, he said, are often highly attractive to young people – and possibly even more appealing to children than to adults. The young people in the study do not seem to see drink advertisements as publicity, but rather as something which is 'just there', as part of the whole Facebook experience and of their lives, e.g. defining beer as a 'social product' rather than a substance, which they drink with friends.

Purves showed statistics indicating a substantial – and ever increasing – presence of alcohol advertising on platforms such as Facebook. So why do young people continue

to use Facebook, when many other successful platforms have been emerging? Purves found that Facebook can become a part of their routine; a place where they put very personal information, where they organise their social lives - and they, therefore, hesitate leaving to join a new platform, because they do not want to miss out on anything.

The findings also suggest that young people see Facebook as a place where they can express themselves freely, and where they can create a new identity for themselves. Alcohol marketing, Purves argued, is very much concerned with influencing drinking behaviour by promoting what types of drinks will help you to convey a desired identity – which implies an expected drinking behaviour.

Purves said that young people are becoming increasingly familiar with alcohol brands, in the same way that they are familiar with other products targeted at their age group. The young people also associated certain drinks with specific youth cultures, such as 'Goths' or 'Skaters'. Some youth cultures, however, such as 'Geeks', do not seem to be associated with alcoholic drinks. Some participants said that they have grown out vodka-based alcopops, which they consider too sugary and with very low percentage of alcohol. They associate this type of drink, with NEETs (the so-called 'young people who are not in employment, education or training'), or with pre-teenagers trying to look grown-up.

Purves found gender distinctions related to specific brands and their visual emblems. For example, young men indicated that they favour drinks such as beer from more established brands, or spirits such as whisky – preferably in conservative or in plain-design packaging, which they see as more masculine. Young men also indicated that they are keen to distance themselves from drinks and behaviours which they think are more appropriate for women; therefore, young men would not want to be seen holding a wine glass.

When aiming to create a more grownup image, e.g. of someone who can handle stronger drinks, young men would rather consume the more traditional vodka brands – and the higher alcohol content is part of the appeal. Young women indicated that they prefer drinks such as wine, and other types of spirit drinks – in colourful and innovative packaging.

Following Purves' presentation, the audience discussions started with a comment about how the alcohol industry varies its activities depending on the target. On the one hand, the industry employs innovative branding which is especially attractive to very young people, but on the other hand, in the reports which they send to policy makers, they use rather dull and conservative designs - which are more suitable when attempting to convey an image, for example, of public health commitments.

Answering a question about the usefulness of health warnings on drinks, Purves explained that the messages from Drinkaware, for example, were hardly mentioned by young people. They see a contradiction when they are told not to drink, while at the same time drinks are widely advertised and available. They had commented on the oddness of having a message asking them to "drink responsibly", written on the packaging of a very small drink can, which is clearly made to be drunk quickly, 'downing in one', and which they are consuming to get drunk faster.

Purves said that young people had mentioned that they know that they may be doing harm to themselves through their alcohol use. However, in the discussion, there was consensus that young people using social networks seem to be getting very little information about how to get advice and support. Some people suggested that they do not see enough messages about negative consequences of drinking alcohol.

Members of the audience suggested that advertisers seem to be engaging with consumers in a way

which is irresponsible, since their advertisements are having an impact on the drinking behaviour of an under-age group. It is of concern if industry players are engaging online – even if unintentionally – with under-age people. In response, industry representatives stated that advertisements are aimed at their consumers, who are adults – and that they are not meant to impact on the behaviour of under-age people, with whom they have no intention to engage. Nonetheless, other discussants argued that the advertisers have in depth marketing research information, and that, therefore, they must know whom they are reaching de facto.

One person commented that it had been suggested that in the past young people drank because they were bored. Therefore, social media should have emerged as a positive thing in young people's lives, that would keep them away from drinking, but this does not seem to be the case.

Policy recommendations which can be drawn from this research include that there should be stricter restrictions on online alcohol advertising to challenge the position whereby young people regard alcohol consumption as a norm in their teenage lives.

SHAAP are now planning a series of events for 2014/2015 on alcohol and mental health. If you are interested in presenting your research, please get in touch with Vanessa Taylor, SHAAP Policy Officer, on shaap@rcpe.ac.uk