

## The blame drain: alcohol advertising

There is a popular misconception among certain sections of society that alcohol is intrinsically bad and dangerous. Of course it can have negative consequences from those who abuse it but it is not an inherent blight on society. The blame for this 'menace' is frequently put on the advertising industry and a piece of research recently published further attempts to prove this.



The study, *Effects of Alcohol Advertising Exposure on Drinking Among Youth*, published by academics and scientists from the University of Connecticut has taken since 1999 to prove that young adults who see more advertising are also likely to drink more. It's taken them six years to prove the obvious, that advertising works. The report also claims the advertising industry denies that increased advertising exposure results in increased consumption, arguing it at best causes brand switching.

The research is very robust, the methodology and sample size strong and the results vigorously controlled. But choosing advertising as the subject of their research is flawed. Advertising is not the source of the problems created by alcohol abuse. It is a contributory factor, as this research proves, but it is by no means the main one. Alcohol consumption is a cultural and social activity impacted by numerous events, contact points, attitudes and peer pressures within a social context. Merely stating or even blaming alcohol advertising for numerous youth behavioural problems avoids the real social problems facing modern western society. For example, in France, Spain, Italy and Argentina young people even before their teens have the opportunity to try wine with their meal with their family. They have this exposure to responsible drinking in a social environment day in day out. Generally these cultures do not experience binge drinking or youth behavioural problems to the same extent as those countries, such as the US and UK, which do not have an inbuilt social use of alcohol imbedded in their cultural fabric.

What this research does do is serve as a warning to alcohol companies to prepare for the increasing legislation facing their brands. One way the alcohol industry could react is to counter these claims that alcohol encourages a breakdown in social behaviour, by promoting the benefits to social interaction and culture that sensible drinking and consumption of alcohol helps engender in a community. Several initiatives already exist to support this, such as The Drink Aware Trust and The Portman Group, although more could be done to change the focus from reducing the misuse of alcohol, to increasing the use of sensible and social drinking. This positive change of emphasis would act as a platform from which to promote the fact that alcohol does not so much create social breakdown as much as enhance social cohesion if used sensibly and responsibly.



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The study accepts that there are several limitations to its research. For example, it does not take into account other contributory influences of alcohol such as parental and peer influences. It recommends that this research should be carried out next and this, I suspect, would be found to have a far greater impact on alcohol consumption, more than the 1% attributed to advertising. These influences which are likely to have a far greater impact on alcohol consumption warrant far greater attention from the academics, politicians and lobby groups which are the section of society, not the general public, calling for change.

There is far too great an emphasis on advertising as the root of social problems; obesity is another area in which advertising is under the cosh, some might say undeservedly. In addition to continuing to promote responsible drinking and its benefits, the advertising industry could also assist in supporting a drive to rectify the breakdown of family values. Governments should look to restore good values into communities before placing blame on an industry that generally promotes sensible, friendly social interaction that develops and strengthens the social and cultural fabric of a community. Researching the impact family and cultural values have on alcohol consumption would certainly be a more useful study and would effectively divert the lobbyists attention from a scapegoat to the source.

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