

An investigation of strategies used in alcohol brand marketing and alcohol-related health promotion on Facebook

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Abstract

Objective: Alcohol brands are incorporating social networking sites (SNS) into their marketing programmes. SNS are also being used to reduce alcohol consumption and harms by health promotion organisations. Marketing via SNS can attempt to influence consumers using a range of strategies from traditional marketing, social media, and behaviour change theory. This study systematically quantifies marketing strategies used by alcohol brands and health promoters on Facebook.

Methods: We identified the 10 most popular alcohol brands and health promotion organisations in Australia on Facebook and extracted all posts from April 2014. A framework was developed, listing 33 SNS marketing strategies. The frequency of use of each strategy in posts was counted for all profiles.

Results: The median number of fans of alcohol brands was 189,290 compared with 7562 for health promotion pages. A total of 210 Facebook posts were analysed. Popular marketing strategies included visual attraction, connecting with other organisations, and links to culture and events. Time-specific and day-specific posts and tweets were used more regularly by alcohol brands than health promotion agencies.

Conclusions: Alcohol brands remain substantially more popular than health promotion organisations, and this difference is likely driven by offline factors rather than specific use of marketing strategies. However, health promotion organisations can learn from the strategies used by popular brands, particularly in the use of time and day-specific content.

Keywords

Alcohol, Social networking sites, Facebook, advertising, health promotion, social marketing

Submission date: 24 August 2015; Acceptance date: 8 April 2016

Introduction

Social media, known as ‘websites and applications that enable users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking,’¹ is widely used, with 1.4 billion monthly active users of Facebook.² Alcohol, one of the most heavily advertised products in the world,³ is commonly promoted on social media.⁴ Social media offers an effective bi-directional advertising platform for alcohol companies, as brands can advertise to specific target groups and communicate directly with their consumers. Social media therefore increases the accessibility of alcohol companies’ target audiences and allows brands to advertise in new, effective and interactive ways.

In 2012, top alcohol brands on Facebook posted 4500 items and accumulated over 2.3 million likes, shares and comments.⁵ The reach of these brands is consistently growing, and underage users may be exposed to alcohol marketing through social media channels.⁶ According to a 2015 poll, one in three

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young Australian adults have noticed alcohol advertising on social media, and 32% of these individuals have interacted with an alcohol brand online via social media, such as liking the alcohol company's Facebook page or responding to a tweet by the brand on Twitter.⁷ Research shows that exposure to alcohol advertisements is related to earlier drinking initiation and increased alcohol consumption among young people.⁸ However, social media provides much more than simply a platform for paid alcohol advertising. On Facebook, brands can set up 'pages' which users can 'like' which results in them subsequently receiving content from the pages in their newsfeeds. These pages can be used to share 'posts' (content including text, pictures, and videos which promote the alcohol brand either explicitly or subtly) with followers. Interaction between fans and pages is also widely shared with the fans' social network. Users can also share their own content and comments on pages to be seen by other page followers. The participation of users in creating and sharing alcohol brand content may strengthen marketing influence on peer groups.⁹ Alhabash et al. found that exposure to alcohol marketing status updates and advertisements was associated with Facebook users' intentions to consume alcohol.¹⁰ This effect was enhanced when a post already had high numbers of likes and shares from other Facebook users.

Marketing strategies used by alcohol companies on social media have been identified in UK^{9,11} and Australian⁵ studies. Carah⁵ reported on a range of strategies used by alcohol brands in encouraging engagement with social media. These include posting questions to initiate interaction, hosting competitions, posting memes and videos, and posting at or just before common times to begin drinking (commonly between 3 pm and 5 pm). Nicholls¹¹ reported that the marketing strategies most frequently used by UK alcohol brands included real-world tie-ins, interactive games, sponsored online events, and explicit encouragement to drink. Atkinson et al.⁹ noted the importance of seasonal events (e.g. Christmas) and real-world tie-ins, and the popularity of competition posts.

An estimated 72% of young adults look for health information online,¹² so health promotion agencies also have the opportunity to use social media for successful information distribution online. Social media provides similar avenues for engaging young people to health promotion agencies as it does to alcohol companies; some previous campaigns relating to other health issues have successfully reached key populations and received impressive engagement and interest in their messages in terms of fan numbers and engagement.¹³ However other health promotion campaigns delivered via social media have had more modest outcomes.^{14,15}

In the alcohol field, only one alcohol-related health promotion programme via social media has been previously described in the literature.¹⁶ 'Hello Sunday Morning' is an Australian social media platform involving goal-setting, blogging, and community support to temporarily stop drinking. A profile of participants and analysis of stated goals has been published;¹⁶ however, no evaluation has yet been conducted to determine the effectiveness of the platform on changing drinking behaviour.

Burton et al. compared tweets from six dominant alcohol brands and six alcohol-related health promotion organisations on Twitter.¹⁷ They found that alcohol brands had far more followers and were more likely to use hashtags, interact with followers, and promote competitions, than health promotion organisations, which mostly engaged in one-way communication of serious and factual health promotion messages. They suggested that health promotion organisations could learn from these brand marketing strategies to achieve greater reach on social media. Recommendations from other social media health promotion successes include individualised interaction with users, encouraging interaction and conversation by posing questions, uploading multimedia material, and highlighting celebrity involvement,¹⁸ strategies which are similar to those used by alcohol brands.^{5,11}

This study aimed to identify and quantify alcohol-related marketing strategies currently used by alcohol-branded and health promotion Facebook pages. While previous studies have provided qualitative comparison of marketing strategies used by alcohol brands and health promotion organisations,^{5,17} or compared the reach and frequency of posts,^{9,11} there have been no previous studies systematically quantifying use of marketing strategies by each type of profile. We specifically sought to examine whether health promotion profiles used a comparable number and type of successful Facebook marketing strategies such as competitions and individualised interaction with users. Identification of strategies used by successful alcohol brands in social media may inform novel or improved strategies for health promotion via social media.

Methods

Design

In this study, we audited the most successful 10 alcohol brands and 10 health promotion agencies on Facebook in Australia. We used total number of fans as a simple measure of success. Using a coding framework, the frequency with which these brands used different marketing strategies was compared.

Procedure

The top 10 (in terms of number of followers) Australian alcohol brands and health promotion agencies on Facebook were identified. For alcohol brands, the website *socialbakers.com* was searched to select the 10 brand profiles on Facebook with the highest number of Australian fans. *Socialbakers* monitors and collates data on the activity of millions of brands on social media and reports statistics by country and brand.

To identify Australian alcohol-related health promotion profiles, a series of searches was conducted on Facebook using terms including 'alcohol' and 'drinking'. This method, however, identified only eight health promotion profiles, therefore a second targeted search was conducted utilising the lists of other profiles that had been liked or followed by the first eight. Fourteen Facebook pages were identified in total. After excluding pages with no activity in April 2014, the 10 pages with the most fans or followers were selected for inclusion in the review. All posts from each of these pages in April 2014 were extracted for analysis. Only posts made by the pages were included, therefore paid advertisements, posts and comments from fans (unless re-posted by the page), and any information sent privately to fans were not included.

A coding framework was developed to categorise social media marketing strategies thought to be potentially associated with Facebook success. Items in the framework were adapted from research describing alcohol marketing strategies on social media^{5,11} and a framework for sexual health promotion strategies on social media.¹⁸ Table 1 shows the complete list of strategies included in the framework. Individual posts could be coded with multiple strategies.

Each post from April 2014 was reviewed against the framework to determine the frequency of use of each strategy. One reviewer (JH) coded all posts and a second reviewer (EC) independently coded 20% of all posts. Results were compared and discussed. The framework definitions were refined and posts were recoded by the first reviewer. Inter-reviewer reliability was high (>90%) for classifying most marketing strategies. There was an initial discrepancy between reviewers (percentage agreement value of <90%) for seven out of 38 marketing tools: question, user-generated content, attraction, social success, link to event, link to culture, and other responsible message content.

Results

The top 10 profiles in each category are shown in Table 2. The median number of followers of alcohol brands was 25 times greater than the median number of health promotion followers. The top 10 alcohol brands were predominantly spirits and beer.

In April 2014, across the top 10 alcohol brand profiles, a total of 129 Facebook posts (median = 13, range = 10, 17) were posted. The top health promotion profiles posted a total of 81 Facebook posts (median = 9, range = 1, 15).

The most commonly identified marketing strategies for alcohol brands on Facebook are shown in Table 3. These included 'attraction' (114 posts), link to culture (56 posts), and day-specific content (28 posts). For health promotion agencies the most commonly identified marketing strategies on Facebook included 'attraction' (58 posts), link to culture (37 posts), and responsible drinking content (30 posts).

Discussion

During April 2014, alcohol brand profiles were much more successful at reaching a greater number of fans on Facebook than the health promotion agencies considered in our study. Importantly, both alcohol brands and the most successful alcohol health promotion agencies on Facebook were using similar strategies to engage followers. For example, both alcohol brands and health promotion agencies frequently posted material designed to be visually attractive to viewers and linked their messages to cultural context, such as public holidays. This finding suggests that health promotion organisations, at least the top 10 organisations included in this analysis, are already utilising best-practice social marketing tools and strategies.

The framework developed in this research may be a useful tool to guide health promotion agencies in designing social media posts and profiles. The framework could also be useful as a standard tool for ongoing monitoring of profiles in further research and could be adapted to other areas (in addition to sexual health¹⁸).

The review showed that alcohol brands were taking advantage of the ability of Facebook to send time and day-specific content, more than health promotion organisations were. Health promotion organisations should attempt to utilise this strategy more frequently. Competitions featured in only a small number of posts, though were slightly more common among brands than health promotion agencies; this may be important, as previous research has shown that competition posts attract the largest number of followers.⁹ Other marketing strategies, including those involving personal interaction with users, were being utilised as much or more frequently by health promotion profiles. Therefore it seems that the popularity of alcohol brands over health promotion evident in our study seems driven by factors other than those easily measurable through our simple enumeration of social media. Previous reviews of social media marketing strategies have

Table 1. Classifications and definitions of marketing strategies.

Classification/category	Marketing strategy and definition
Prompting interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question; post which asks the fans to participate in a specific activity (e.g. answer, quiz, share, promote, read, etc.), not including rhetorical questions • Game; post that promotes activities such as personal experiments or fan-video submissions (e.g. other uses for products) • Fill-in; post that prompts users to complete a sentence or paragraph • Photo tagging; post of an image that is linked to users (e.g. tag or @)
Relationship building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition; post that promotes users to enter details or perform an activity for the chance to win a prize • Reply; post that directly responds to a user • User-generated content; post of user material (e.g. from a fan) and not from another organisation • Event photo; post that displays an image from an event, occasion, incident or experience (excluding computer generated or edited images) • Organisation content; post of content originally (primary source) from another organisation (e.g. another health promotion agency)
Emotion inducing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meme; post of a viral image for humour purposes • Humour; post with any purpose of entertainment • Attraction; post with a photo, video or other link that appeals to users visually (e.g. desire to have)
Association with success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sporting; post that associates or implies sporting success with the brand or consuming its product(s) • Social; post that associates or implies social success with the brand or consuming its product(s) • Sexual; post that associates or implies sexual success with the brand or consuming its product(s)
Real-world tie-ins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link to event; post that references a current event (e.g. sporting match) that fans can attend • Sponsorship; post that promotes a financial partnership to link two organisations together for mutual benefits (e.g. alcohol brand advertising and sports event endorsement) • Celebrity / expert endorsement; post that involves a well-known individual or industry expert • Link to culture; post that references a music band, television programme, or any other popular culture (e.g. family, relationships, travel, food, sport, Easter, etc.)
Encouragement to drink	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recipe; post that lists or links to a list of ingredients for an alcoholic drink or other consumable • Time-specific content; post that references a particular time for consumption (e.g. after work, weekends) • Day-specific content; post that references a particular day for consumption (e.g. public holidays)
Responsible drinking message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Link to health information; post that names or links to health information, a health promotion agency, or health service • Use of responsible consumption watermark; post with an image that contains a small message of responsible consumption • Other responsible message content; post that includes other responsible messages (e.g. alcohol brand-specific message or hashtags with responsible messages)
Link to other social media channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YouTube; link can be through a html address, hyperlink or channel icon • Instagram; link can be through a html address, hyperlink or channel icon • Google+; link can be through a html address, hyperlink or channel icon • Other; includes any linking reference to Soundcloud, Pinterest, Tumblr, or another blog or social networking site

found other strategies to be associated with success; Burton et al. found that alcohol brands had far more followers and were more likely to use hashtags, interact with followers, and promote competitions, than health promotion organisations.¹⁷ Veale et al. found that making regular posts/tweets, individualised interaction with users, and encouraging interaction and conversation by posing questions were associated with increased success among sexual health promotion profiles.¹⁸

Although this review did not aim to comprehensively compare advertisements with Australian¹⁹ or Facebook²⁰ alcohol advertising guidelines, some

alcohol brands were using strategies that are not allowed under these codes. For example, linking alcohol to sporting, social, or sexual success is prohibited by these codes but was identified in 29 (6%) posts. For example, a post for a sweet liqueur page aimed at women stated ‘You don’t get to see your girlfriends very often, so make sure it’s a special dessert when you do’, accompanied by a picture of a decadent cake made with the liqueur; this post linked alcohol to social success by suggesting the use of this liqueur in a dessert would impress a friendship group. A post from a beer brand posted an image with the text ‘a journey of 1000

Table 2. Top 10 alcohol brands and top 10 alcohol-related health promotion profiles on Facebook.

Top 10 Alcohol brand profiles			Top 10 Health promotion profiles			
Brand	Product type	Facebook Fans (n)	Profile	Organisation	Goal	Facebook Fans (n)
Wild Turkey	Spirit	299,635	Be The Influence	Government	Reduce binge drinking	189,307
Rekorderlig Cider	Cider	291,363	Dry July	Non-profit organisation	Abstinence	23,100
Jim Beam	Spirit	273,042	How to Drink Properly	Drinkwise (industry funded)	Reduce binge drinking	16,800
Bundy Rum	Spirit	254,298	Hello Sunday Morning	Non-profit organisation	Abstinence	14,900
Pure Blonde	Beer	208,793	FebFast Australia	Non-profit organisation	Abstinence	9675
Jack Daniel's	Spirit	169,786	Be a Wingman	Non-profit organisation	Harm reduction	5555
Baileys	Spirit	155,133	A Lighter Night	Non-profit organisation	Reduce binge drinking	882
American Honey	Spirit	153,576	National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre	Academic/Research	Professional and community information	576
Johnnie Walker	Spirit	128,642	Cringe the Binge	Non-profit organisation	Reduce binge drinking	514
Tooheys Extra Dry	Beer	117,032	Drink Tank	Non-profit organisation	Professional and community information	262

miles begins with one step and ends with a [name of beer]', with the caption 'A moment of pure motivation. Does this get anyone strapping on the runners?' This linked alcohol use as motivation for sporting success.

Nearly half of Facebook posts included a 'drink responsibly' watermark or similar; this strategy has been shown to be either ineffective or to actually subversively promote alcohol.²¹⁻²³ One particular concern is that the second most popular Facebook health promotion page, 'How to Drink Properly' is produced by DrinkWise, Australia's alcohol industry-funded organisation that provides alcohol health information as one of its functions. Such organisations, established and funded by the alcohol industry, have been criticised for their support of the industry, biased agenda, lack of transparency, and distortion of evidence.^{24,25} Social media users may not be aware of links between these organisations and the alcohol industry, and the potential questions raised around the credibility of the information it provides.

Only one alcohol health promotion profile attracted a number of fans similar to top alcohol brands; 'Be The

Influence' with nearly 200,000 fans. Unfortunately, this page was discontinued in April 2014 due to the defunding of the Australian National Preventive Health Agency. Relatively successful pages such as 'Hello Sunday Morning', 'Dry July', and 'FebFast' all act as communities to support short or long-term alcohol abstinence. Evaluation of one of these strategies is being conducted,^{16,26} but to date there is no evidence to support their impact on alcohol consumption. These programmes may have been more likely to use time and day-specific content as a marketing strategy during their primary periods of activity.

Limitations of this analysis included limiting inclusion to only 10 of each type of profile and to a single month which was not characterised by any high-profile alcohol-related events (e.g. December holiday party period or Dry July). Only posts made by pages were analysed, so broader marketing strategies were not accounted for (e.g. paid advertisements). We were unable to determine whether specific posts had been promoted by the pages, thereby using payments to increase their reach beyond their fan base. Using this

Table 3. Frequency of marketing strategies used by the top 10 alcohol-branded and health promotion agency profiles.

	Top 10 alcohol-branded profiles (n = 129)	Health promotion agency profiles (n = 81)
Prompting interaction		
Question	40 (31%)	20 (25%)
Game	1 (1%)	3 (4%)
Fill-in	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Photo tagging	19 (15%)	16 (20%)
Relationship building		
Competition	9 (7%)	5 (6%)
Reply	5 (4%)	0 (0%)
User-generated content	6 (5%)	13 (16%)
Event photo	24 (19%)	21 (26%)
Organisation content	11 (9%)	26 (32%)
Emotion inducing		
Meme	0 (0%)	4 (5%)
Humour	13 (10%)	13 (16%)
Attraction	114 (88%)	58 (72%)
Association with success		
Sporting	6 (5%)	0 (0%)
Social	14 (11%)	0 (0%)
Sexual	4 (3%)	0 (0%)
Real-world tie-ins		
Link to event	14 (11%)	19 (24%)
Sponsorship	18 (14%)	3 (4%)
Link to culture	56 (43%)	37 (46%)
Celebrity/expert endorsement	2 (2%)	15 (19%)
Encouragement to drink		
Recipe	13 (10%)	0 (0%)
Time-specific content	25 (19%)	0 (0%)
Day-specific content	28 (22%)	0 (0%)

(continued)

Table 3. Continued.

	Top 10 alcohol-branded profiles (n = 129)	Health promotion agency profiles (n = 81)
Responsible drinking		
Links to health information	5 (4%)	29 (36%)
Use of responsible watermark	60 (47%)	4 (5%)
Other responsible message content	10 (8%)	30 (37%)
Link to other social channels		
YouTube	6 (5%)	7 (9%)
Instagram	1 (1%)	2 (3%)
Google+	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other	2 (2%)	3 (4%)

simple framework we measured only quantity not quality of posts; for example, all uses (or attempted uses) of humour were counted equally with no regard to how funny the post was. Identification of health promotion profiles was not systematic and some successful profiles may have been overlooked; social media platforms have limited search functionality and there are no best-practice guidelines for systematic searches of social media.²⁷ The identified number of followers referred to followers of the Australian version of a profile; however, some global brands may link local profiles to their broader global fan base. The success of profiles was determined solely by total number of followers, which may not equate with impact. Using this simple measure does not account for level of engagement with profiles (for example reading and sharing posts), and does not reflect changes in real-life drinking behaviour.

Although we intended this analysis to identify marketing strategies associated with use by successful alcohol brands on social media, that health promotion agencies would subsequently be able to utilise, only time-specific and day-specific posts appeared to be used more regularly by alcohol brands than health promotion agencies. However, we were able to quantify the most commonly used marketing strategies of both types of profile. Future work could involve utilising the framework to guide more in-depth investigation of how brands and organisations are utilising different strategies; qualitative analysis may yield further insight.

Only a few health promotion profiles have had successful reach in the Australian social media

marketplace, and the impact of these on drinking behaviour has not been determined. It is vital that health promoters continue to conduct evaluations of social media health promotion, whether successful or not, to build the body of evidence in this field.

Conflict of interests: None declared.

Funding: The project was funded by an Australian Government Department of Health Preventive Health Research Fellowship. Paul Dietze is supported by an NHMRC senior research fellowship.

Guarantor: Megan SC Lim.

Ethical approval: Not required.

Contributorship: JH conducted this study for the Degree of BSc with Honours at the University of Melbourne. MSCL and PMD designed and supervised the study. MSCL led the writing of the manuscript; JH and EC conducted the data analysis. All authors contributed towards the final manuscript and interpretation of results.

Acknowledgements: Alisa Pedrana and Emma Weaver provided advice regarding the framework. The authors gratefully acknowledge the Victorian Operational Infrastructure Support Program received by the Burnet Institute.

Peer review: This paper was reviewed by 3 individuals who have all chosen to remain anonymous.

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