# Merging sport and drinking cultures through social media

## Researchers

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## Summary

The sport-alcohol-social media triumvirate presents a significant emerging issue in the fight against alcohol-related harm. This report identifies and explores how alcohol brands are using social media to connect sport’s identity, culture and camaraderie with alcohol consumption. It also reveals the main strategies undertaken by alcohol companies to achieve interaction and social activation with consumers.

This study explored sport-linked alcohol communication appearing on the most frequently used social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. The focus was primarily on the major alcohol brands sponsoring the Australian Football League (AFL), the National Rugby League (NRL), and Australian Cricket during the latter part of 2013 and throughout much of 2014. The study was conducted during the active seasons of each sport, paying particular attention to the associated marketing and promotional activity during key events such as finals.

## Outcomes

The social media platforms most commonly used by the identified alcohol brands were Facebook and Twitter, but the complementary use of other forms of digital media, such as applications (‘apps’), to increase consumer engagement was noted. YouTube also featured in links from Facebook and Twitter to showcase advertisements created by the brands to promote their products or sport-related competitions.

Communication via social media often occurred in real time during sporting events, creating an environment of camaraderie through a shared sport experience and by tapping into the ‘second screen’ experience as consumers engaged with their mobile devices throughout an event, either in or away from a sport stadium.

Four main strategies were identified that used the association with sport to create opportunities to interact with consumers and to immerse the brands in the sport consumption experience. These sport-alcohol-social media strategies are described as ‘calls to action’ because they seek to stimulate consumers to actively engage with the brand, rather than passively receiving brand messages, as with conventional advertising. Further, the calls to action aimed to achieve ‘social activation’, that is, access to the social network of the targeted consumer.  The calls to action are:

• Call to compete – leveraging the competitive nature of sport, this strategy attempts to engage consumers – and augment the sport experience – through promotional competitions often displaying both sport and alcohol branding.
• Call to collaborate – this strategy actively pursues a higher level of engagement with consumers through co-creation of content or by stimulating user-generated content using sport as a common language.
• Call to celebrate – using sporting victory and shared camaraderie, this strategy seeks to embed alcohol as an integral part of celebrating and basking in the reflected glory of sporting achievement.
• Call to consume – beyond celebration, this strategy seeks to normalise alcohol consumption as part of the overall sport experience, attempting to embed drinking as part of a consumer’s sport consumption practices and social interactions with ‘mates’.

The impact and effectiveness of these calls is facilitated through the use of messages designed to resonate with the target consumer. The calls to action comprise the mechanisms used by alcohol brands through social media, and the themes of identity, culture and camaraderie give their communications the power to embed alcohol as part of the consumer’s sport identity and sport experience. The ultimate goal appears to be to merge drinking culture with sport culture.

## Recommendations

The results from this exploratory study highlight an emerging platform for alcohol brands to engage with a new generation of digital natives who view social media as an integral aspect of their social identities.

The framework of social activation strategies used by alcohol brands in leveraging their associations with sport, and the messages they embed to maximise the effectiveness of these strategies, suggests that existing regulatory and policy interventions will struggle to interrupt the cultural blurring between drinking and sport.

While conventional advertising is unidirectional and can be more easily banned or blocked, social media works through a fundamentally different channel whereby users actively engage in the dissemination of marketing messages as well as the co-creation of content, making this medium invulnerable to most forms of existing marketing regulation.

[view the report](https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Merging-sport-and-drinking-cultures-through-social-media.pdf)