

Media Release

FACEBOOK AWASH WITH UNREGULATED ALCOHOL PROMOTION

1 May, 2014: New research has revealed for the first time the extent of alcohol brand activity on Facebook in Australia, and raised further concerns about the absence of regulation governing the promotion of alcohol.

At the end of 2012, the top 20 alcohol brands in Australia had more than 2.5 million engaged followers on Facebook and posted more than 4500 items of content, which in turn was interacted with (liked, shared and commented) more than 2.3 million times.

On average brands posted four pieces of content a week, with the most prolific, Jim Beam, posting nearly twice a day with each post generating on average 543 interactions.

Commissioned by the Foundation for Alcohol, Research and Education, the research, *Like Comment Share: Alcohol brand activity on Facebook*, found brands are investing significant resources to create high-quality content and employing professionals to manage communicate and engage with Facebook users.

Highly visual, and increasingly mobile, alcohol brands ask questions, host competitions, post memes and videos, produce advertisements and images of promotional activities and rely on fans to use their own identities and networks to circulate their brand messages.

The brands identified included 10 spirit, five beer, three liquor, one cider and one wine brand, with fan bases ranging from Rekorderlig's 223,687 fans to Midori's 55,579.

Further highlighting their explosive growth, in the 16 months since the study concluded, alcohol brands with an Australian Facebook page have seen their fanbase grow by more than 44 per cent.

Report author Dr Nicholas Carah, of the University of Queensland, says the research gives an insight into the sophisticated use of social media by alcohol brands in Australia and illustrates Facebook's significant role in alcohol promotion and advertising.

"The alcohol industry has developed an extensive, real-time culturally embedded mode of marketing on Facebook that continuously seeks engagement from fans," Dr Carah said.

Dr Carah says the extensiveness of alcohol brand activity on Facebook is just one issue not currently addressed by existing regulation that should be considered in determining future directions for the regulatory environment.

“Alcohol brands are using Facebook to get the consumers of their products to collaborate in the creation and circulation of brand messages, but our current regulation doesn’t address consumer collaboration, let alone what types of consumer collaboration are appropriate. We are also seeing Facebook being used to leverage real world promotions. Our current regulatory frameworks see promotion and advertising as two distinct and separate areas, but on Facebook, we are seeing a merging of those two activities.

Dr Carah said brands are investing significant resources into real-world promotional activities (activations), and building themed social spaces in nightlife precincts and cultural events.

Themed areas such as XXXX Island, Rekorderlig’s Winter Forest and Jagermeister’s Hunting Lodge are used to create branded content and interactions with fans.

The new study also highlighted the global nature of alcohol marketing, with alcohol campaigns developing a global approach to branding. During the course of the study two brands, Smirnoff and Absolut converted their Australian pages into global pages which reach 10.8 million and 4.8 million fans respectively.

Dr Carah says with the ability to reach millions of consumers without paying for traditional advertising, the alcohol industry can invest more in culturally embedded forms of marketing such as sponsorship, popular culture, viral content and real-world activations.

“Harnessing the power of Facebook, alcohol brands can shift their marketing resources to below-the-line activities that are less visible to authorities and regulators,” Dr Carah said.

The research also highlighted issues of privacy and transparency.

Working together, the alcohol industry and Facebook are accumulating extensive data about consumers that is becoming increasingly central to the way in which alcohol companies build brands.

Dr Carah says we need to pay attention not only to the messages that brands produce, but to the kinds of data their branding generates and how they use that data.

“Alcohol brands are creating messages that target consumers based on who they are, their cultural preferences, their peer network and location. Currently there is no regulation to address how the alcohol industry collect information about consumers, the kind of information collected, nor how it is used to target consumers,” Dr Carah said.

While alcohol brands are becoming increasingly visible on Facebook, at the same time, the general public know little about what brands are doing.

Dr Carah says it is this lack of transparency that is most concerning.

“Current marketing regulation works at the level of content. It attempts to regulate what brands can say and can’t say, when and where and who they can say it to by observing and scrutinising those activities. Increasingly however, brands use targeted messages, shaped and visible only to specific users, so that more and more of these alcohol promotion activities become invisible to regulators and researchers,” Dr Carah said.

FARE Chief Executive, Michael Thorn says it is not surprising that the current self-regulatory alcohol advertising regime finds itself ill-equipped to respond to social media and the online environment, and says the new research further exposes its flaws.

“The current industry self-regulatory regime, as weak as it is, in dealing with traditional forms of alcohol advertising, was established in a pre-Facebook world, and as such, is simply not capable of addressing the types of aggressive and pervasive advertising and promotion that we see today so entrenched in Facebook.”

“It’s worth noting that this issue is currently before Government. The Australian National Preventive Health Agency recently released its draft report into alcohol advertising regulation, and today’s findings add further compelling evidence that this issue needs to be addressed by Government,” Mr Thorn said.

Dr Nicholas Carah (@nanniccc) and Michael Thorn (@MichaelTThorn) are available for interview.

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Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) FARE is an independent, charitable organisation working to prevent the harmful use of alcohol in Australia. Through its national grants program and commissioned research, FARE has established itself as a leading voice on alcohol and other drugs issues. FARE works with community groups, all levels of government, police, emergency workers, research institutions and the private sector to address alcohol-related problems. For further information visit FARE’s website: www.fare.org.au