

MEDIA RELEASE

LINES BLURRED AS INDUSTRY MIXES SPORT AND ALCOHOL COCKTAIL

20 April 2015: Alcohol companies are finding new and sophisticated ways to use the power of social media to pitch drinking as pivotal to the sporting experience, a new study shows.

Social media is now a key player in promoting alcohol – giving the industry the ability to reach millions of consumers and aggressively target young drinkers.

The *Merging sport and drinking cultures through social media* study, funded by the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) and undertaken by RMIT University, found the alcohol industry cleverly timed its posts to tie in with professional sporting events to encourage consumption.

RMIT's Associate Professor Kate Westberg, one of the authors of the study, said the industry's social media strategies were carefully developed to go beyond just promoting their product.

"The ultimate goal appears to be to merge the drinking culture with sport culture," she said.

"They seek to normalise consumption by using social media to present drinking as an integral part of the sport experience whether spectatorship, celebration or commiseration."

Sport provided a powerful marketing platform for the alcohol industry – particularly when combined with the collaborative and immersive nature of social media, the study found.

This included posing sports questions, using player endorsements and prompting fans to head to the pub when a game is about to start.

Many platforms encourage users to interact with sites by liking or sharing content which sees consumers themselves become unofficial marketers for alcohol companies.

The study analysed Facebook, Twitter and YouTube content around the Australian Football League, National Rugby League and Australian Cricket 2013-14 seasons.

It found it was common for the industry to use social media to target consumers with product messages themed around sporting identity, culture and camaraderie.

Brands such as Carlton Draught, Victoria Bitter, Wild Turkey, Jim Beam, XXXX Gold and Bundaberg Rum were looked at.

Brands use a range of mediums, such as smartphone apps, push notifications, trivia and tipping competitions, celebrity endorsements, promotional merchandise, videos, memes and co-created content linked to sport to engage with consumers and gain access to their extended social networks.

Sport-linked social media strategies featuring a 'call to action' encouraging competition, collaboration, celebration and consumption were commonly used.

“The ‘calls to action’ aim to stimulate consumers to actively engage with the brand, rather than passively receiving brand messages, as is the case with conventional advertising,” Associate Professor Westberg said.

FARE Chief Executive, Michael Thorn says the study offers further insights into the concerning ways in which the alcohol industry is able to co-opt the sporting culture in order to shape the drinking culture and manipulate consumers.

“Alcohol’s marketing and sponsorship linkages are most apparent on our TV screens, but in fact, are just as insidious on social media where the alcohol industry has become increasingly sophisticated in the ways it ties its products to professional sport. Of concern, the online space is even less regulated than traditional media. Self-regulation isn’t working, it isn’t protecting children from harmful alcohol advertising and those harms will continue until such time that the Commonwealth Government steps in,” Mr Thorn said.

The researchers will present their findings at the [World Social Marketing Conference](#) in Sydney on Monday 20 April 2015.

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The **Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)** is an independent, not-for-profit organisation working to stop the harm caused by alcohol. Alcohol harm in Australia is significant. Over 5,500 lives are lost every year and more than 157,000 people are hospitalised making alcohol one of our nation’s greatest preventative health challenges.

For over a decade, FARE has been working with communities, governments, health professionals and police across the country to stop alcohol harms by supporting world-leading research, raising public awareness and advocating for changes to alcohol policy. In that time FARE has helped more than 750 communities and organisations, and backed over 1,400 projects around Australia.