

YOUTH IDENTITY FORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY ALCOHOL MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers linkages between contemporary marketing theory and practice, and emerging conceptualizations of identity, to discuss implications for public health concerns over alcohol use among young people. Particular attention is paid to the theorizing of consumption as a component of youth identities and the ways in which developments of marketing praxis orient to such schemata. Our analyses of exemplars of marketing materials in use in Aotearoa New Zealand, drawn from our research archive, emphasise the sophistication and power of such forms of marketing. We argue that public health policy and practice must respond to the interweaving of marketing and the self-making practices of young people counter this complex threat to the health and wellbeing of young people.

(120 words)

INTRODUCTION

Beverage alcohol is prominent among the many branded consumer goods that young people increasingly use as a way of signaling their identity and place in the world. The producers and marketers of beverage alcohol, many of whom are now global players (Babor et al., 2003, Jernigan, 2002) deploy sophisticated promotional practices to target specific groups such as beginning drinkers, regular teenage drinkers and established young drinkers (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2004, Brain, 2000, Randen and Lunde, 2002). This marketing utilizes multiple channels (youth radio, television, events, websites, mobile phones) and diverse modalities (advertising, sponsorship, branding) in order to influence the formation of youth identities in ways that orient strongly to the consumption of alcohol (Jernigan and O'Hara, 2004).

The convergence of these multiple elements occurs within interrelated strands of change driven from the West, in macroeconomics, politics and psychologies. The consolidation of hegemonic transnational capitalism, the rise and entrenchment of neoliberalism (Bauman, 1998, Chomsky, 2003, Kelsey, 1995, Kelsey, 2002), and the emergence and proliferation of consumption-oriented societies and identities (Giddens, 2000, Klein, 2000) represent profound challenges to theories of social order. Increasingly there are shifts towards an understanding of society as individualized, heterogeneous, complex and incorporating rapid change mediated especially by mass communications systems (Giddens, 2000).

In this mainly conceptual paper we review intersections of theorizing on youth identity formation and consumerism with contemporary marketing, and illustrate the practical consequences using some ‘production-side’ (Stern, 1996) empirical work on alcohol marketing in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our aim is to promote debate around the interweaving of marketing and the self making practices of young people and so stimulate public health responses to this complex threat to the health of young people.

ALCOHOL IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

Aotearoa New Zealand, like many other countries, has enacted changes in policy in the past fifteen years that have increased youth exposure to alcohol advertising and marketing, and increased youth access to alcohol (Hill and Casswell, 2001a). These changes are part of the general liberalizing, deregulating environment referred to above, for which Aotearoa New Zealand has been a key experimental site (Kelsey, 1995, Moran, 1999).

In 1992 a change in alcohol advertising and marketing policy allowed brand advertising of alcohol in the broadcast media in New Zealand. This resulted in a proliferation of advertisements on radio, television and the internet promoting various brands and types of alcohol (Habgood et al., 2001). Deregulation has also changed practices for the sale of beverage alcohol with a diversification into supermarkets, local off-licenses, sports and social clubs (Hill and Casswell, 2001b). In 1999 a law change lowered the legal drinking age and the age limit for purchasing alcohol and from 20 to 18 years, increasing youth access to alcohol. Subsequent national alcohol surveys have highlighted increased youth consumption (Casswell et al, 2004).

ALCOHOL AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Alcohol, being a toxic substance widely used in society, is responsible for population level harms that cost nations, communities, families and individuals dearly (Babor et al., 2003, Bruun et al., 1975, Edwards et al., 1994). Alcohol has long been recognized as a central issue for public health (Edwards et al., 1994) representing a major source of preventable damage to population health. The central issue is that the higher the average per capita consumption in a society, the greater the level of alcohol-related harm that will be experienced. Public health has traditionally adopted the approach of attempting to reduce average consumption especially via policy controls on availability; alcohol policy is broadly defined as any purposeful effort on the part of governments to minimize or prevent alcohol-related harms (Babor et al., 2003, Edwards et al., 1994). Marketing, as part of the availability equation has been subject to regulatory restraint through policies on promotion (Hill and Casswell, 2004), price, quality, age restrictions and licensing regimes (Babor et al., 2003, Edwards et al., 1994) . Understanding the influence of marketing in youth consumption is of crucial importance to public health responses and to the broader public good. Babor et al. (2003) summarise the situation thus:

Exposure to repeated high-level promotion inculcates pro-drinking attitudes and increases the likelihood of heavier drinking. Alcohol advertising predisposes minors to drinking well before legal age of purchase.

Alcohol's prominent and hazardous influence among young people suggests that the convergence of alcohol marketing and youth lived experience is a relevant research topic for public health. Alcohol remains a public health issue for young people because they are drinking more, often in heavier drinking sessions, and are less likely to see alcohol as a hazard, suggesting that alcohol may be assuming a normalised position (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2004, Babor et al., 2003, Habgood et al., 2001, Jernigan and O'Hara, 2004).

In order to understand and contest alcohol marketing practices, research is required to illuminate how alcohol marketing operates as a social practice influencing the identity formation of young people. To do this, research must approach marketing as a historically contingent and contextually bound social practice that creates meaning and significance only in the context of wider social practices.

THEORISING YOUTH IDENTITY AND CONSUMPTION

Social theory suggests that the apparent certainties or 'meta narratives' of modernity are disintegrating and the social world today is now increasingly being described as characterised by difference and fragmentation (Featherstone, 1991). Central to these arguments are claims that social identity is more diverse, uncertain and individualised than ever before (Giddens, 1991, Beck, 1992, Bauman, 1998). Contemporary social theories of youth identity and consumption are key tools for understanding and responding to contemporary alcohol marketing practices.

The functional aspects of commodities are increasingly subsumed by aesthetic interactions that have symbolic value on multiple levels (Lyon, 1999). From this perspective markets are described as fluid, networked and disaggregated, and the self that engages with the market is constantly being formed through the negotiation of various identities.

In the context of these debates about the emergence of a consumer driven society, new claims about youth identity formation are also being developed. Common to these perspectives is an understanding that youth identity is constituted through consumption practices, representation and the transference of symbolic meaning. Giddens (1979, Giddens, 1991) promotes 'lifestyles' as the descriptor for the reflexive relationship between the agency of the individual and the structures of society. Miles (2000, p.26) argues that young people's lifestyles – "lived cultures in which individuals actively express their identities but do so in direct relation to their position as regards the dominant culture" – are the social manifestation of specific identity positions.

Miles claims that symbolic consumption is a central feature of young people's lifestyles and a hallmark of ways in which people claim significance and meaning in their lives. Through consumption practices young people create micro-cultures that shape their identity and status in relation to others. In a context of rapid and constant social change it is argued that young people experience stability through the creation of consumer identities.

“Such stability is not manifested in the form of a deep-rooted sense of sameness, but in a flexible, mutable and diverse sense of identity within which consumerism appears to present the only viable resource...Young people use consumption as a means of establishing lifestyles that make the world a manageable place”. (Miles, 2000, p.142).

A primary theme within social science theorising of youth identities is that identities are constituted through representation and not outside of it. In contrast to Miles’ presentation of youth lifestyles, Stuart Hall’s (1996) work presents the perspective that identities arise from the narrativisation of the self and accordingly are produced in specific historical and institutional sites, discursive formations and practices. The reflexive project of making and representing the self and who the self ‘might be’ occurs through the symbolic transference of meaning, framing young people as consumers of the symbolic. One of the main sites for this symbolic expression is the body; the presentation of the body symbolizes the inclusion and exclusion of the self in relation to others (Butler, 1993).

A further strand in the theorizing of youth identities has emerged specifically in relation to alcohol. Brain (Brain, 2000) develops Bauman’s (1998) ideas about the resources and willingness to play the consumer role to argue that young people now live in a postmodern alcohol order that produces bounded and unbounded forms of hedonistic consumption. Acceptable forms of consumption (albeit often incurring multiple harms) occur in association with social inclusion and disposable income. Anti-social consumption attaches to marginalisation and scarcity of resources, where any means of

securing supply and disregard of consequences to self and others are hallmarks of the drinking by those who feel they have nothing to lose (McIntosh, 2004).

In this context Beck's (1992) theorising of the 'risk society' is of some relevance given that risk is now an organizing principle in society and is central to the construction of identities. Both young people's negotiation of the risks of alcohol consumption and society's management and reaction to those risks, impact on the ways in which young people perceive themselves and the interpretation of the messages they receive over alcohol consumption from both industry and society.

This brief sketch has highlighted notions of youth consumer lifestyles; reflexive and symbolic representation of the self that are central to social science debates of contemporary youth identity formation. The following section will examine how these same concepts are manifest in contemporary marketing research and practice.

CONTEMPORARY MARKETING THEORY

Key commentators within the commercial sphere also draw on claims that there has been significant change in society, and argue the importance of this analysis in informing marketing practices. Cova (1996a, Cova, 1996b) argues that, for the marketing sphere, a postmodern culture entails the interplay of differences such as those between globalisation and localisation, unification and fragmentation, clarity and ambiguity. He suggests that the marketing discipline is reorienting from the efficiencies of mass promotion to the specificities of focused micro-marketing. Consumption rather than

production is seen as a driving force of society (Miller, 1995, Wilmshurst and Mackay, 2002) and is being theorised as a critical target in marketing? (Lash and Urry, 1994). This may entail obvious targeting of subpopulations (as in niche marketing) but in the view of some commentators should mean working to “engineer permission to maintain dialogue with individuals” (Godin, 1999).

Kotler and Armstrong (1997) argue that marketing arose in the 1960s as a means of refocusing commerce from production to consumption. Developments in marketing research and practice have entailed conceptualizing the consumption more heterogeneously at the level of individual life choices as opposed to a homogenous mass of consumers. To this end it is argued that marketing no longer confines itself to the issues of volume, quality, product demarcation, market share and so on but is now moving to construct its pitches amid the dynamic, complex, “multiple realities” of contemporary populations.

Such approaches to marketing are moving to encompass the implications of increasing market fragmentation, diverse consumer subjectivities, product hyper-reality (the elevated importance of the image/brand of the product over its material existence or actual consumption), informational capitalism, unstable production and consumption patterns and “economies of the sign” – the increasing role of branding and symbolism in consumption (Klein, 2000, Van Raaij, 1993, Venkatesh, 1999).

Lopiano-Misdom and De Luca (1997) in a book titled *Street Trends* made the claim that

Youth culture will no longer be rushing to purchase what is “new” as they stand within today’s technological, multiple supermall society, but instead what is “meaningful”. In other words, they’ll be looking for products that have “soul”...In the year, 2000, the only objects that will survive are those that people relate to mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. Products that are deemed “multi dimensional” .

In this context of commercially oriented theorizing, these authors provide an example of the engagement of marketing professionals with social theory around youth cultures and identities as multiple, in flux, and shaped by the consumption of meaning. This engagement is further evidenced by market research commentators utilizing social science techniques (such as discourse analysis and ethnographic research) to understand identity formation. Increasingly market research commentators are arguing for the use of discourse analyses in order to develop more nuanced conceptualizations of market segments and lifestyle clusters (Brown, 1995a, Holt, 1997). This is epitomized by Thompson’s claims that

A hermeneutic approach can help marketers manage the complexities (and respond to the opportunities) posed by the plurality of consumers’ meaning based relationships to products, brands, services and promotion (Thompson, 1997, p.439).

It is apparent that commercially focused research of markets has for some time been promoting understandings of marketing as a core social practice that shapes young people's identity in diverse ways that extend far beyond the functional value of purchasing products. The following section illustrates how notions of identity formation and symbolic communication through discourses of consumption and the reflexive self are utilized in marketing practice.

CONTEMPORARY MARKETING PRACTICES

Marketing practices increasingly revolve around the realisation that “personal identity and community are no longer given but must be constructed on an everyday basis by the consumer” (Cova, 1996a). This view is consistent with Warde's (1994) observation that “people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they possess and display”. Understanding of consumer behaviour is seen as available through knowledge of “people's everyday subjective realities” (Ueltzhoffer and Ascheberg, 1999) and consumption is conceptualised more as the uptake of symbolic meanings than the acquisition of material products (Elliott, 1999). In this setting, changing elements in marketing systems, especially the product and its meaning, must be constantly monitored and positioned by marketers in order to optimise engagement with target markets (Cova, 1996a, Cova, 1996b, Delrio, 1996, Viser, 1999).

Advertising

Advertising is widely understood as one of the central elements of contemporary marketing. Research of this medium reveals that the polysemic qualities of text are increasingly drawn upon in order to optimise its reach and relevance (Jensen, 1995). Brown (1995a, 1995b) notes an increasing use of skepticism, subversiveness, irony, anarchy, playfulness, paradox, ephemerality and sees “parodic and self-referential advertising campaigns” as part of the marketing climate.

Similarly, Hitchon and Jura (1997) argue that “intertextuality” – the multiple cross-references among media, texts and advertising – is crucial to understanding meanings and persuasive mechanisms produced in advertising. They offer a taxonomy of intertextuality, recommend the treatment of advertisements as complex, multilevel discourses and argue that “more attention needs to be given to the growing use of postmodern discourse in contemporary advertising” (Hitchon and Jura, 1997, p.142).

Many advertisements entail an interactive aspect in the sense that the content engages the audience, evoking their cultural capital in ways that rely upon some of the methods of conversation (turn-taking, anticipation, sentence completion etc). Gray et al.(1997) argue that “there is a dialogic relationship between the image and the consumer” suggesting further that methods that have been applied to such materials (discourse analysis, conversation analysis, literary analysis etc) should provide useful avenues for the investigation of advertising. Ritson and Elliot (1999) draw attention to the use of

“puzzle-like hermeneutic tasks” designed to increase interpretative engagement of the audience with the message/product.

Advertising imagery is implicated in the forging of social and individual identity through a reciprocal relationship with patterns of consumption. The role of advertising in the creation and maintenance of gendered ideologies around sport and exercise is a prime example (Carty, 1997). Viser (1999) notes the structural predominance of the electronic media in the development of ideology and consciousness and argues that advertising has taken a more prominent position especially within the cultural milieu of capitalism.

Branding

Like advertising, the theory and practice of branding has also been changing in response to developments in the contemporary marketing environment and is in many ways at the cutting edge of change in commercial practice. According to Klein (2000) current marketing approaches are dominated by the idea that the major place to add value to a product is in the brand. Many companies can make a pair of sports shoes for \$20, but only those with established brands can sell them for \$200.

Studies focus on brands as entities that have material impacts in the world and characteristics not previously attributed to product branding. Fournier (1998) argues for the consideration of the brand as a “direct relationship partner” and discusses types of relationships that form between brands and consumers. Hanby (1999) considered the implications of conceptualising brands as complex, holistic entities even with characteristics akin to those of living beings. These ideas have implications both for the

organisations that wield the brand and for consumers who relate to them (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

CONTEMPORARY ALCOHOL MARKETING AND YOUTH

We argue that the marketing of alcohol to young people fits and is at the forefront of the trends being described in the marketing literature as postmodern marketing. Advertising and branding are crafted to mirror and express dominant representations of youth culture and lifestyles. Promotion is never static, even in established markets, as new cohorts of young people become available as targets for marketing activity on a continual basis as they mature (Saffer, 2002).

Earlier research suggests that alcohol advertising has direct connections with youth drinking (Atkin et al., 1984, Atkin, 1990, Connolly et al., 1994). Aotearoa New Zealand studies have shown that liking for alcohol advertisements at 18 was positively associated with increased alcohol consumption in later years (Wyllie et al., 1998, Casswell and Zhang, 1998) supporting the claim that there are links between alcohol advertising and drinking. Wyllie et al. (1997) found that “adolescents (as opposed to older participants)...seemed to be more accepting of the messages and appeals of the advertisements, and more likely to say that they wanted to consume the advertised product.” In the USA, Jernigan and OHara (2004) researched youth exposure to alcohol advertising in a range of media and concluded that young people were seriously over-exposed to alcohol advertising. They have argued for much tighter control on all aspects of marketing to prevent the harms that arise from exposure to this damaging agent.

Jackson et al. (2000) describe specific campaigns designed to sell to 'starter' and 'established' drinkers in the age range 14-17 years. The 'marketing mix' uses variations on product, price, promotions and distributions to cater to the characteristics of these two groups. Promotion includes the recommodification of drinks into designer packages to compete in a context of changing patterns of youth recreational drug use. This involves product naming, graphics and point of sale advertising that play on recognisable features of 'designer drugs', flattened, screw top containers which are portable and easily concealed, and informal word-of-mouth peer endorsement for 'starter' products as opposed to media advertising, and active youth sales promotions for the 'established' products.

Another illustration is evident in the website for Absolut vodka where the marketers attempt to naturalise their brand and product as an inherent part of young people's social cultures. Absolut presents itself as a cultural medium, by sponsoring fashion events, dance parties and creative competitions; these are all reported on the website in a way that encourages viewer interaction, with attached recipes for Absolut based cocktails. This positioning of Absolut as a cultural icon is not new. Schroeder (Schroeder, 2002) reveals how Absolut over the last two decades have developed their advertising as a sophisticated art form that communicates meaning, to which the alcohol product is a contextual artifact rather than a commercial intrusion. However what is new is the widespread, multifaceted strategy that utilizes the full variety of communication media to naturalise the cultural significance of Absolut.

Klein (2000) gives the example of the monthly Miller-Molson beer company event series in Toronto in which top line international acts are regularly sponsored by the company but never announced until 24 hours before the event. Consumers thus book for the Miller-Molson event knowing that they will be well satisfied because the sponsor has established a record for excellence and reliability. Beer is never mentioned but presumably sales are enhanced by association with images and events of culture, life style, and success.

CONTEMPORARY ALCOHOL MARKETING IN NEW ZEALAND

Our analyses are applied to a range of advertising materials from the setting in Aotearoa New Zealand. We apply a critical discursive approach (Wetherell et al., 2001a) to exemplars of marketing materials drawn from a research archive gathered as part of a qualitative project entitled “*Contemporary alcohol marketing: production and interpretation of meaning in youth cultures*” funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand. The analyses assume the action orientation of language and sign (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) (Potter and Edwards, 1997) in a broad social constructionist frame (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, Gergen, 2001, Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), posing the fundamental research question “What is achieved by this text?”.

As part of a qualitative project entitled “*Contemporary alcohol marketing: production and interpretation of meaning in youth cultures*” funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand., we have gathered a large research archive of contemporary marketing materials in a range of media. In the following section we will apply a broad critical discursive approach (Wetherell et al., 2001b)(Taylor, 2001) to understanding ways in which exemplars from our this source produce and maintain an environment conducive to the

unproblematic consumption of alcohol. These analyses assume the action orientation of language and sign (Potter and Wetherell, 1987)(Potter and Edwards, 1997) in a broad social constructionist frame (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, Gergen, 2001, Denzin and Lincoln, 1994)?? (Denzin and Lincoln, 1995; Gergen, 1990), posing the fundamental research question “What is achieved by this text?”.

Recognizing the importance of identities in symbolic consumption, such as that of current alcohol marketing, links brands to niches of gender and culture. The current Tui Beer (Dominion Breweries) billboard promotion plays to a young masculinity, working on a discursive orientation to the skeptical and ironic. The campaign uses a series of slogans, such as “You Know the Odds, Now Beat Them – Yeah, Right!”, “CU LTR 4A LATTE – Yeah, Right!” and “Get Trim in Just 3 Minutes a Day - Yeah, Right!” Lest there be any doubt as to the target audience there are numerous sexist strap lines such as “I hardly noticed her moustache”, “I was reading her t-shirt” and “Her butt walked into my hand”. By adopting such a posture the campaign creates an oppositional inner circle of meaning and identity for consumers. In doing so it makes use of the cultural capital of its audience with skill and flair, eliciting a tacit acknowledgement of the shared understandings that make sense of the text of the billboards. In using a common linguistic trope the advertisements blend smoothly into the cultural landscape. Diverse interactions with the Tui campaign illustrate this phenomenon as other audiences use the trope to express resistance or alternative messages. A Wellington billboard was recently altered from “I hardly noticed her moustache” to read “I hardly noticed how small his dick was...yeah

right” (Davies, 2002). Over Christmas 2002 an Auckland inner city church ran a version with the strap “He’s just a man...yeah right!”

The power of the campaign turns on its ability to capture salient narrative fragments and exploit them in a multi-channel branded context using a cultural form that is an identifiable element of local youth discourses. We suspect that, far from alarming the marketers, reactions, both positive and negative, will be taken as indications of a hermeneutic infiltration of the social context that will ensure its continued viability as a marketing vehicle.

A recent Steinlager ad on local television offers up multiple subject positions through a series of thematically linked but separate vignettes,

Dance ... like no one is watching; Sing...like no one is listening; Love...like you’ve never been hurt; “Work ...like you own the company; Live...like there is no tomorrow. (<http://www.steinlager.co.nz/brand/t2000.htm>)

In doing so it encourages male viewers to identify with a series of different portrayals of masculinity linked to success, excitement, pleasure, and mateship, making only a low-key reference to its product in the final frames. This example also raises the issue of the cultural targeting of advertising; with one vignette specifically evoking a Maori cultural milieu through its portrayal of some lads mischievously performing a haka¹ in an empty football stadium.

¹ A ceremonial dance/chant form from the indigenous Maori culture of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

A significant development entails ‘one-stop’ promotional environments such as those provided by Export Gold Beer and Channel Z youth radio. In these sites a wide variety of “attractive” interactive entertainments are provided free in a fully-branded context (livery, logos, music etc). These virtual habitats are dynamic and often cutting edge in relation to youth art, music and practices; acclimatisation is rapid, acculturation follows.

A large annual youth music event the Big Day Out has for several years been publicized and sponsored by Dominion Breweries Export Gold brand beer (especially through its website) in association with youth radio, particularly Channel Z. The event which brings together top local bands with headline international acts attracts an “all ages” youth audience to a local stadium in which the product is exclusively available in a separate age-rated space. Thus the festival is a vehicle for modeling Export Gold drinking to people of all ages in an exciting environment in which there are diverse other promotional activities including logos, livery, audio acknowledgements and ‘competitions’ (often for branded prizes).

Another marketing project targeting legal age youth drinkers, involves Smirnoff vodka which has taken upon itself to sponsor an annual “half day off”. The company provides livery promotional giveaways, cheap drinks and \$250,000 worth of ‘bar tabs’ allocated in \$25 lots to participants who register through the website. Youth radio is again actively involved in the promotion of the day which with the incentives described above encourages people to take the afternoon of Friday 13th November to visit the participating

bars to redeem the hand outs. Hitherto commercial entities have not attempted to establish holidays, this ordinarily being the domain of state or religious institutions. To do so clearly expresses and encourages a sense of rebellion or privilege among participants; presumably any resultant positive sentiment benefits the brand.

The recent arrival of the 'Fluid' takeaway liquor outlet in Auckland also emphasizes strategies to market to particular identities. Fluid caters to the needs of the younger market by providing a comprehensive, up to date range of RTDs that are easily accessible and provided within an environment designed to make it easier for the younger drinker to drop in on their way to an event. It has a 'club' feel with lighting and flooring bubble effects, music and videos. It includes specific design features for its younger female customers, who have been found to be uncomfortable using the customary beer fridges in regular liquor outlets (Craccum, 2003). These 'point of sale' adaptations produce a seamless congruence between the environments in which young people purchase and use alcohol and the marketing discourses that promote it.

Another example of the association of alcohol with broader environments is the "Fire Engine" web site (Lion Breweries, recently withdrawn), which provided visitors with access to a vast array of sports, erotic, relationship and entertainment information and images packaged within a "Lion Red" branded environment. The general flavour of the site was described by Sinclair (2000) (cited in de Boni, 2000) as "satirically aggressive laddishness" and "a sort of elaborate in-joke". The consumption of such ideas and images in this environment makes links to the brand in an indirect way, avoiding for

example any backlash against “overkill”, while at the same time building wide ranging connections into multiple interests of the user.

Alcohol marketing in New Zealand today also includes advertisements, product development and promotions specifically targeting women. An obvious example is the introduction of Archers Aqua – fruit flavored schnapps which is presented in point of sale promotions and advertisements as the drink of choice for young, sociable women who are out having more fun than their male partners. In addition the rise in production of specialty beers encompasses the development of beers for the female (and youth) taste; these include chocolate and fruit flavored beers that come in more sophisticated packaging.

While it may be argued that campaigns such as those featured above cannot be shown to definitively target underage (or even legal age) youth drinkers, we would argue that very young people are a constant ‘bye-catch’ of inestimable value to marketing. A good example is provided by the ‘Chinheads’ Lion Red advertising project on billboards, television and magazines, which used inverted faces (often retouched with ‘hair’ and ‘beards’) articulating ironically pitched macho and sexist dialogue and speech bubbles. The billboards for example included “Have you seen the new girl band? No but I love their thongs”; “Any requests? Something instrumental”, over a constant slogan “Up for it”.

Market research showed that 97% recalled seeing the Chinheads, 85% liked or loved the Chinhead billboard or thought it was “okay”. In addition, 71% could spontaneously recall seeing a Lion Red billboard, 64% thought the humour appealed to underage drinkers and 52% thought the Chinheads had strong appeal to kids and teenagers (GALA, 2001), suggesting an appeal to a youth target. Such findings lend credence to the idea that, whatever the impact of advertisements in direct terms, they have broader indirect effects (Ritson and Elliott, 1999) in which ‘genial idiocy’ and masculinity role modeling are, by association with the brand, producing a climate of acceptance for beer among young people for whom consumption is still for the most part a distant or very new practice.

These separate and ostensibly competing marketing campaigns, appropriate local and contemporary knowledge to relevant cultural milieux in ways that build and maintain a highly positive orientation to alcohol, its consumption and its place in everyday lives. Our analysis draws upon a small sample of the archive we have assembled but serves to illustrate that what might be dismissed as illusory concerns in relation to any one campaign is far more obvious when tracked over more comprehensive research base.

CONCLUSION

There has been a proliferation of marketing techniques that would appear to embody the ideas that there are now new media for communication, multiple and reflexive subjectivities, new parameters and determinants of meaning and a steadily advancing branding of culture and identity. New marketing practices are grounded in social science

theories of identity and consumption bringing a worryingly inventive robustness to the goal of naturalizing commodities as positive and unproblematic markers of who we are.

This is reflected in the multiple opportunities that alcohol marketing has taken advantage of to extend the reach and image of their products. Alcohol is prominent among the many branded consumer goods that young people increasingly use as a way of signaling their identity and place in the world. Although the alcohol industry would refute any suggestions that their campaigns reach or even target underage drinkers, there is a certain internal logic to such claims. It is clearly important for the sustainability and expansion of alcohol markets that new generations are constantly primed and recruited into the ranks of consumers.

This paper has contributed to the growing public health understanding of the complexity and power of such forms of marketing. We would argue that the developments we have discussed present a profound challenge to existing regulatory frameworks and public health strategies and that new approaches are urgently needed address this major imposition on public and youth health.

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