

Do marketing and alcohol treatment/ public health experts think televised alcohol
advertisements abide by regulatory guidelines?

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ABSTRACT

Televised alcohol advertisements in the UK must abide by the BCAP Code, which provides guidelines concerning advertisements not implying, condoning or encouraging immoderate, irresponsible or anti-social drinking. Previously, 75% of 373 general public respondents shown one of seven advertisements rated a breach of at least one guideline. The present study assessed whether experts in marketing (n=25) and alcohol treatment/ public health (n=25) perceived the same seven television alcohol advertisements as complying with the BCAP Code. Overall, 83% of advertisements were rated as breaching at least one guideline. This provides further proof that self-regulatory alcohol guidelines are not fit for purpose.

Introduction

Worldwide, alcohol accounts for over three million premature deaths per year, and increases risk of over 200 diseases as well as the harms due to alcohol dependence (World Health Organisation, 2014). A link has been suggested between alcohol advertisements and an increase in alcohol consumption, with one meta-analysis finding that there was a small but positive association between the amount of advertising and alcohol consumption in adult populations (Gallet, 2007). A recent review by Jernigan et al. (2017) found a similar association in young people, concluding there is a relationship between exposure to alcohol marketing and later alcohol consumption, with higher exposure linked to engaging in more binge and hazardous drinking behaviour.

Self-regulatory guidelines, which the media and advertising industry has voluntarily established and paid for, have been developed for alcohol advertisements in many countries in order to minimise the harmful effects of alcohol consumption. For example, in the UK self-regulatory guidelines are co-regulated by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Ofcom, who oversee marketing communications and administer guidelines governing the advertisements. The Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) consists of representatives from advertisers, broadcasters and media owners and is responsible for writing and maintaining the broadcast guidelines.

The main principle outlined in the BCAP Code is that “Advertisements for alcoholic drinks should not be targeted at people under 18 years of age and should not imply, condone or encourage immoderate, irresponsible or antisocial drinking.” (Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice, 2010: p.92). See table 4 for a list of the 15 BCAP Code guidelines that specifically relate to television alcohol advertisement.

In the first peer-reviewed study in the UK to examine the success of the BCAP Code, 373 members of the general public were shown one of seven alcohol television advertisements (Searle et al., 2014). They then rated their agreement with a set of statements that were based on the text contained in the BCAP Code. This research found that 75% of the general public rated the alcohol advertisements they viewed as breaching at least one BCAP Code guideline. Further, some of the BCAP Code guidelines were perceived to be breached more than others. Over half of participants agreed that there was a breach of guideline 19.3 which prohibits advertisements from implying that alcohol can contribute to popularity, while only 1% of the participants rated a breach of guideline 19.9 which prohibits advertisements from linking alcohol to illicit drugs.

A potential limitation of the UK study of the BCAP Code study concerns the validity of the questionnaire, which was created specifically for that study (Searle et al., 2014). The questionnaire used text taken directly from the BCAP Code and the format was based on a scale previously devised (Babor et al., 2008). This scale was previously devised to assess violations in the US Beer Code, the self-regulatory guidelines in place in the USA. As the UK questionnaire had not been formally validated, the authors suggested that subsequent research could compare the general public sample ratings to those of various ‘experts’ in the areas of public health or advertisement (Searle et al., 2014). If the pattern of breaches derived from expert ratings is found to be similar to the general public, then this will support the validity of the UK questionnaire and findings.

Previous studies in other countries have assessed the views of expert samples regarding the self-regulatory guidelines for alcohol advertisements. In the USA, fifteen public health professionals’ rated between 35% and 74% of 289 alcohol advertisements as being in violation of the US Beer Code (Babor et al., 2013b). An additional study by the same team compared the results of experts across the areas of health and marketing with the ratings of members

from vulnerable groups (Babor et al., 2013a). They found that both groups perceived a high number of breaches across the six alcohol advertisements, with the experts rating a mean number of 17.8 violations per advertisement and the community sample rating significantly higher at 20.5 violations per advertisement.

The main aim of the present study was therefore to compare ratings from two expert samples with the general public sample previously obtained by Searle et al. (2014) in terms of breaches of the BCAP Code for seven alcohol advertisements. The expert groups in the present study were professionals working in the fields of (a) marketing and (b) alcohol treatment/ public health. In addition, two possible sources of variation in the expert raters' judgement of BCAP Code compliance were examined.

First, it was hypothesised that those who work in alcohol treatment/ public health would be more likely to rate a BCAP guideline breach than those who work in marketing, due to differences in their professional identity (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Those who work in alcohol treatment/ public health may be more motivated to protect the public by a stricter adherence to the Code, as this approach is more congruent with their professional identity, whereas those who work in marketing may identify more with the advertising industry.

The second potential source of variation in ratings was how appealing participants rated the advertisements. There is evidence that perceiving an advertisement as appealing can lead to a more positive attitude towards the brand that it represents (MacKenzie et al., 1986; Mitchell, 1986). It was therefore hypothesised that individuals who found the advertisement more appealing would rate fewer BCAP Code breaches.

Methods

Participants

There were fifty participants' overall, with 25 marketing experts and 25 alcohol treatment/ public health experts. All of the participants worked at universities, local authorities or public health groups in North West England, were over the age of 18 years and were competent English speakers. As previously reported, the participants from the study by Searle et al. (2014) were 373 adult volunteers representative of the general public recruited from a major train station in North West England.

Design

The present study had a two group within-subjects Latin square design, with repeated alcohol advertisements shown in a counterbalanced order. See Appendix for further information on the Latin square design used to counterbalance the advertisements. The main comparison used a between-subjects design, which assessed the association between the overall ratings of BCAP Code breaches by the expert sample and the Searle et al. (2014) general public sample.

Procedure

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method, whereby one focal person from each of the expert groups contacted potential participants who were experts in public health, alcohol treatment or marketing. The potential participants were given the participant information sheet and asked to contact the researchers if they wanted to take part.

The participants who agreed to take part were visited at their place of work and were shown each of the seven advertisements on a portable computer. After each advertisement they completed a questionnaire assessing compliance with the BCAP Code and ratings of appeal of advertisements. When the participants had viewed all seven advertisements they

were asked to complete a final questionnaire assessing alcohol consumption, professional experience and demographic information.

The two expert groups in the present study and the general public sample from the Searle et al. (2014) study were shown the same seven alcohol television advertisements and were given the same questionnaire to complete, which assessed BCAP Code guideline compliance. The main difference between the two studies is the sample, and number of advertisements viewed by each individual. The Searle et al. (2014) study had 373 members of the general public who each watched one advert, yielding 373 assessments. In contrast, the current study uses 50 experts who each watched all seven adverts, yielding 350 assessments.

Materials

The same seven alcohol advertisements that were used previously in the Searle et al. (2014) study were sampled from the UK channels ITV1 and Channel 4 in February 2013. See below for a description of the seven advertisements used in the study.

1) Captain Morgan's Spiced, which features four men being served 'Captain and Colas' at a bar, while different women are shown discovering large human-shaped objects in place of the men.

2) Cobra Beer, which depicts a man walking down a busy train in India serving Cobra Beer to the young passengers.

3) Disaronno Originale, where a voiceover describes the recipe for 'Disaronno cocktail number 59' while the ingredients are shown on screen.

4) Foster's Lager, which is set in 1888 in Melbourne where the townspeople watch and cheer as the mayor drinks a pint of Foster's Lager.

5) Guinness, which shows a male cobbler bored at work, where time is reversed and a house is prevented from burning down and then time is slowed down as a group of soldiers are reunited with the townspeople.

6) Kronenbourg 1664, which features ex-footballer Eric Cantona explaining how ‘the hop farmers are treated like the footballers of Britain’, with several middle-aged farmers being pampered by the townspeople.

7) Strongbow Pear, which depicts a man standing alone in the desert and shooting an arrow through a pear.

After the participants viewed each advertisement, they completed a questionnaire that consisted of 36 items measuring whether the participants perceived the advertisements as breaching the BCAP Code guidelines. The questions were an amended version of the Babor et al. (2008) questionnaire, used previously by Searle et al. (2014). The 36 item questionnaire assessed the BCAP Code and covered 15 out of the 17 guidelines as two were excluded from the original questionnaire (Searle et al., 2014). Rule 19.15.2 was excluded as it was deemed unsuitable for adult participants to assess which characters’ example in the advertisements were likely to be followed by, or had a strong appeal to, those under 18 years of age. Rule 19.11, which states advertisements may include sale promotions provided that they do not imply, condone or encourage immoderate drinking, was deemed to be characterised adequately by rule 19.2, which states advertisement must not feature, imply condone or encourage irresponsible or immoderate drinking (see table 4). The questions had a 5-point rating scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’ with regards to statements about the BCAP Code.

Participants were also asked five questions on the appeal of each advertisement, which were adapted from a study by Chen et al. (2005). The questions related to aspects of the advertisement the participant may have found appealing, such as the characters, the music, the

humour, the story and in general how much they liked the advert. The questions were answered on a 5-point rating scale ranging from ‘dislike a lot’ to ‘like a lot’, with an additional option of ‘does not apply’.

The second questionnaire asked four questions about professional experience developed specifically for the present study, and demographic questions regarding sex, age and ethnicity, which were adapted from the 2011 Census Household Questionnaire (Office for National Statistics, 2013).

Analysis

Responses to the BCAP Code questionnaire were dichotomised. The options ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ were coded to indicate a breach of a guideline, while ‘neither agree nor disagree’, ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ indicated compliance with a guideline. The overall frequency of breaches was calculated for each group of participants across the different advertisements and across the BCAP Code guidelines, with a one sample t-test used to analyse whether the results were significantly different from zero. A Spearman’s rank correlation was used to measure the agreement across advertisements between the different groups and across guidelines between the different groups. The groups were the general public, all experts, the marketing experts and the alcohol treatment/ public health experts.

To assess the advertisements’ appeal an average rating was calculated from the five questions for each advertisement, with imputation for up to two missing or not applicable items. A Spearman’s rank correlation was also used to examine if the appeal ratings for each of the advertisements influenced their judgement of breaches in the BCAP Code.

A Wilcoxon signed ranks test was used to assess whether there were differences in mean numbers of breaches across the seven advertisements, between different groups of raters.

Results

The majority of the sample was White British and between the ages of 30 to 59 years, with nearly 50% of the sample having more than 10 years' work experience in their respective field. See table 1 for the full demographic information of the sample and table 2 for information on the participants' typical alcohol consumption.

[TABLE 1]

[TABLE 2]

The Captain Morgan's Spiced advertisement was rated as breaching at least one BCAP Code guideline by the highest proportion of expert participants (94%). The Disaronno advertisement was rated by the lowest proportion of participants (60%) as breaching at least one BCAP Code guideline breach. Overall, 83% of the 350 total advertisements assessed were rated by the expert sample as breaching at least one BCAP Code guideline. See table 3 for the full results.

[TABLE 3]

The Spearman's rank correlation coefficient between the general public's and all experts' rankings of advertisements by proportion of respondents who indicated a breach in the BCAP Code was $r=0.88$ ($p=0.01$) across the seven different alcohol advertisements. The agreement of rankings of advertisements between the general public and the alcohol treatment/public health expert group was $r=0.86$ ($p=0.014$). The agreement of rankings of advertisements by the general public and the marketing expert group was $r=0.73$ ($p=0.061$).

Comparison between guidelines

The proportion of the expert sample that rated at least one advertisement as breaching a BCAP guideline was significantly different ($p<0.05$) from zero for 14 of the 15 guidelines,

with guideline 19.9 not significant (see table 4). The BCAP guideline rated as the most breached was guideline 19.8 (57% of advertisements were rated as breaching this guideline), which states the advertisements should not imply alcohol has therapeutic qualities capable of changing mood, physical condition or behaviour. The BCAP guideline of 19.3, which states that alcohol should not imply it can contribute to popularity and confidence, was rated as the second most breached (55% of advertisements). The guideline least rated as breached was guideline 19.9 (1% of advertisements), stating that alcohol must not be linked to illicit drugs.

The association between general public rankings compared to both groups of experts across the guidelines was $r=0.98$ ($p<0.001$).

[TABLE 4]

Explaining variation in respondents' ratings of breaches

Participants from an alcohol treatment/ public health background rated a higher mean number of breaches for all seven advertisements than did participants from a marketing background (Wilcoxon $W=0$, $n=7$, $p<0.05$) or the general public sample (Wilcoxon $W=0$, $n=7$, $p<0.05$). There was no significant difference in mean number of breaches across advertisements between participants from a marketing background and the general public sample (Wilcoxon $W=3$, $n=7$, $p>0.05$).

Captain Morgan's Spiced was the only advertisement where the rated number of breaches was significantly associated with appeal ratings. Higher appeal ratings for this advertisement were associated with fewer rated breaches ($r=-0.43$, $p=0.002$). There was no significant association between rated BCAP Code breaches and ratings of advertisements' appeal for any of the other six advertisements ($-0.01<r<0.21$; $0.143<p<0.929$). See table 5 for the expert groups' ratings of appeal for each of the seven alcohol advertisements.

[TABLE 5]

Discussion

Principal findings

Overall, 96% of the experts rated one of the seven advertisements as breaching at least one alcohol-specific BCAP Code guideline, with 83% of assessments of advertisements rated by experts as breaching at least one guideline from the BCAP Code. There was a positive association between the present study's combined marketing and alcohol treatment/ public health expert ratings and the Searle et al. (2014) general public ratings. There was a high degree of agreement between experts' and general public's perception of the BCAP Code guideline breaches, such that the Captain Morgan's Spiced advertisement was rated as being in breach of guidelines most often and the Disaronno Originale least often. The BCAP Code guidelines that advertisements should not imply alcohol can contribute to popularity and confidence (19.3) or that it has therapeutic qualities (19.8) were rated by both groups as being the most frequently breached. The guideline that alcohol must not be linked to illicit drugs (19.9) was rated as least frequently breached by both groups. Experts who work in alcohol treatment/ public health were more inclined to perceive a breach of a BCAP Code guideline than those who worked in marketing or the general public.

Strengths and limitations

The present study's main strength is that it is the first study in the UK to investigate the extent of agreement to which expert groups and a general public sample rate television alcohol advertisements as complying with the BCAP Code. By using the same advertisements and the same questionnaire, the breaches identified by experts are comparable to those of the earlier study with the general public and thereby validates the questionnaire used.

Unlike the Searle et al. (2014) study where the 373 members of the general public viewed and completed a questionnaire on one advertisement, only 50 experts participated in the present study. However, in the Searle et al. (2014) study, each participant viewed only one advertisement, whereas participants in the present study viewed all seven advertisements, resulting in a similar overall number of ratings. Further, the use of a Latin square design ensured the ordering of the advertisements was balanced across participants.

Another potential limitation of the present study concerns how “expert” the participants were, given that 17 of the 50 experts had less than 5 years’ experience in their profession, and 38 were employed in universities. On the other hand, 24 of the 50 experts had over 10 years’ experience, and 12 out of 25 of the alcohol treatment/ public health group worked outside of universities. Degree of expertise does not appear to be a major threat to the validity of the present study, given the striking degree of consensus across participants, with 48 of the 50 participants viewing at least one advertisement as breaching guidelines.

Relation to wider literature

The present study’s findings are consistent with previous research conducted in the US, Australia and the UK, which found that the majority of participants rate breaches in the countries’ self-regulatory guidelines concerning alcohol advertisements (Babor et al., 2013b; Jones & Donovan, 2002; Searle et al., 2014). The finding that 83% of assessments of advertisements were rated by experts to breach at least one BCAP Code guideline is in opposition to the ASA’s most recent survey which presented a rate of 99% compliance (Advertising Standards Authority, 2010). The validity of the ASA’s findings is however questionable since the study was not conducted by an independent body, does not report details of methods used and has not been published in a peer-reviewed journal.

The finding that 83% of the total advertisements assessed were rated as non-compliant with the BCAP Code is slightly higher than the Searle et al. (2014) finding that 75% of the advertisements assessed by the general public sample rated a breach of at least one BCAP Code guideline. Further, in the present study there was a higher mean number of breaches rated by the alcohol treatment/ public health group, compared with the general public or marketing groups. These findings therefore contrast somewhat with previous findings that experts rated fewer breaches than the general public (Babor et al., 2013a). However, Babor et al. (2013a) compared the community raters from various vulnerable groups, that might be motivated to rate more breaches than the general public sample in the present study. Further, the Babor et al. (2013a) study included a wider variety of experts, including but not limited to the alcohol treatment/ public health experts in the present study that rated more breaches than did the marketing experts.

The finding that only the participants' rating of appeal for the Captain Morgan's Spiced advertisement was associated with the ratings of breaches, suggests that the appeal of the advertisement has little effect on an individual's ratings of breaches of the BCAP Code. However, the results are not conclusive due to the study's small sample size.

Implications for practice

The finding that the general public and experts are in high agreement suggests that the general public can give valid judgements with regards to the BCAP Code using the Searle et al. (2014) questionnaire. Overall, 83% of the total advertisements assessed by the expert sample were rated as breaching at least one BCAP guideline, while 75% of advertisements were rated by general public as breaching a guideline. It is clear from these findings that the current self-regulatory guidelines for the UK are ineffective at regulating the content of alcohol advertisements. It has previously been argued that the current regulatory system allows

advertising companies to deviate from the explicit wording of the guidelines by creating implicit campaigns that still allude to themes such as social success and underage drinking (Hastings et al., 2010). The present results suggest that the general public, marketing experts and alcohol treatment/ public health experts have no trouble discerning the presence of the implicit messages, although the ASA appears unable to do this.

The use of self-regulatory bodies is further questioned by research into the guidelines for Australia, where the Australian Advertising Standards Board (ASB) deals with complaints and breaches. Jones and Donovan (2002) previously found that a board of eight marketing academics rated seven out of nine alcohol advertisements, previously assessed by the ASB to be compliant, to breach at least one guideline. These results suggest that either self-regulatory bodies lack objectivity when considering the guidelines or that both groups have different interpretations of the guidelines.

There is a new compelling case for changing the current system in the UK in the best interest of the public, especially given the association between higher rates of hazardous drinking and weak alcohol advertisement restrictions (Bosque-Prous et al., 2014). The results of the present study and other research in this area further demonstrate the need for an independent panel for reviewing BCAP Code violations.

Future research

Subsequent research into new media, such as Facebook and Twitter, also appears warranted, given that alcohol brands are starting to invest heavily in marketing via these websites. Social media provides an important communication channel for alcohol companies to present their product in a positive way (Burton et al., 2013). These media are difficult to regulate, with the ASA (2013) previously reporting that 42% of children in their survey were

falsely registered as aged 18 or over on social media sites, exposing them to advertisements for age-restricted products such as alcohol.

Alcohol advertisements' non-compliance of self-regulatory guidelines has been documented across multiple countries, with a review by Noel et al. (2017) finding that none of the 19 studies analysed concluded that the guidelines were effective. As the ASA appears to be the main group perceiving alcohol advertisements as highly compliant with the BCAP Code it is important that their decision making process be investigated in order to analyse how they arrive at their judgements. This could be carried out by analysing the ASA's documents on dealing with complaints of breaches of the BCAP Code, similar to the way Hastings et al. (2010) analysed a large number of internal marketing documents from alcohol producers and their communications agencies.

Additionally, further research into the effect of advertisement appeal on the ratings of BCAP Code breaches is warranted, using a larger sample of both participants and alcohol advertisements. It would add most to knowledge if the alcohol advertisements tested were award winning or exemplary in some other way to further examine the effects of the advertisement's appeal on ratings of BCAP guideline breaches. Further examination of the ratings of different occupation groups also appears warranted, given the discrepancy in results between UK and US studies on the association of occupational group and number of breaches.

Summary

The vast majority of experts rated at least one breach of a BCAP Code guideline in the seven alcohol advertisements. These findings make it clear that the current UK self-regulatory guidelines for alcohol advertisements are ineffective at protecting the public. The results are consistent with a number of international studies, which indicates that there is a problem not just with the BCAP Code but with the general use of self-regulatory alcohol guidelines. The

case is now compelling for an independent review panel to regulate and moderate the advertisements for breaches.

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Table 1: Demographic features of sample including their professional experience

	Alcohol treatment/		
	All experts	Marketing	Public health
Gender			
Male	22	7	15
Female	28	18	10
Age			
18-29	6	3	3
30-44	23	15	8
45-59	16	6	10
60-74	4	1	3
Ethnicity			
White	44	20	24
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups	2	2	0
Asian/Asian British	3	2	1
Other ethnic group	1	1	0
Amount of experience			
Less than 1 year	3	0	3
1-5 years	14	7	7
6-10 years	9	6	3
More than 10 years	24	12	12
Main organisation work for			
University/higher education	38	25	13
City council/local government	10	0	10

Health or social care service	0	0	0
Other	2	0	2
Proportion of work concerned with alcohol			
0-20%	38	25	13
21-40%	7	0	7
41-60%	1	0	1
61-80%	2	0	2
81-100%	2	0	2

Note. Missing age data for one participant.

Table 2: Description of participants' typical alcohol consumption

	All experts
Consume alcohol	
Yes	45
No	5
Frequency of alcoholic drink	
Almost every day	3
Three to six days a week	18
Once or twice a week to once or twice a month	21
Once every couple months to once or twice a year	3
Not at all in last 12 months	0
Frequency of 5 or more (if male) or 4 or more (if female) alcoholic drinks in two hour period	
Almost every day	0
Three to six days a week	3
Once or twice a week to once or twice a month	7
Once every couple months to once or twice a year	25
Not at all in last 12 months	10

Table 3: Proportion of general public and experts who perceived at least one breach of a BCAP Code guideline for each of the seven alcohol advertisements

Advertisement	Experts	Marketing	Public Health	General Public
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Captain Morgan's Spiced	94	96	92	91
Cobra Beer	88	92	84	77
Disaronno Originale	60	64	56	49
Foster's Lager	92	92	92	87
Guinness	78	76	80	78
Kronenbourg 1664	92	92	92	84
Strongbow Pear	80	80	80	58

Note. The findings for the General Public sample were previously reported in the Searle et al.'s (2014) study.