Constructing alcohol identities: the role of Social Network Sites (SNS) in young peoples’ drinking cultures

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Key findings

• SNS are an important part of the multi-platform marketing of alcohol. A variety of distinct techniques are used to make brands relevant and appealing to potential consumers, and to encourage interaction and viral marketing.

• Young people appeared indifferent to alcohol marketing on their personal SNS profiles, yet when discussed in more detail were highly knowledgeable about alcohol SNS marketing techniques, which they engaged with for personal gain (e.g. being informed on local events, winning alcohol brand competition prizes).

• Young people’s economic means to purchase alcohol influenced their drinking patterns and practices. Not having the disposable income to fund a night out ‘in town’ was overcome by pre-loading on cheap alcoholic drinks on offer in supermarkets.

• Pre-loading was highly valued by young women as a context for perfecting glamourized self-image and beautification in preparation for a night out. It was also valued as a space for the creation of ‘ideal’ photographs to be uploaded to SNS and a time to bond with friends.

• Alcohol consumption and related practices on SNS (e.g. retelling of humorous experiences and stories of intoxication, brand association, attendance at alcohol events, drinking locations and contexts) acted as forms of cultural, symbolic and social capital and provided one means of conforming to peer group values, whilst distinguishing the self from others (e.g. younger people, the opposite sex, consumers of particular alcoholic drinks).

• Displaying Facebook alcohol content was a normal, routine and highly managed aspect of young peoples’ drinking experiences. Such content was popular among peers, receiving positive feedback and much appraisal.

• SNS acted as an extension of the space in which symbolic meaning could be created from the display of cultural drinking capital through SNS content such as photographs and statuses. These digital environments allowed young people to act out their individual and group identities to a peer audience and space for drinking cultures to be created and alcohol-related identities shaped.

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Background

In recent years, Social Network Sites (SNS) have become an important aspect of young people’s leisure and friendship networks, including peer drinking culture. Thus, the intoxigenic spaces in which young peoples’ drinking practices and related identities are created and performed have now entered online environments (Moreno et al., 2009a, 2009b; Atkinson et al., 2011; McCreanor et al., 2013; Institute of Policy
Research, 2013). Within such online spaces, young people are exposed to and interact with new forms of innovative online alcohol marketing (Brooks, 2010; Freeman and Chapman, 2008; Mosher, 2012; Nicholls, 2012, Winpenny et al., 2014) and peer created content relating to alcohol (e.g. drinking photographs and statuses) (Griffiths et al., 2010, p528, Nicholls, 2012; McCreanor et al., 2013; Institute of Policy Research, 2013). An increasing body of international research has emerged exploring young people’s relationship with SNS alcohol marketing and the role of SNS in youth drinking cultures. However, qualitative research exploring the experiences and perspectives of young people in a UK context is lacking. This research therefore aimed to gain a better understanding of the role and place of SNS in young people’s drinking culture, and in the construction of alcohol-related identities in a peer group context. The theoretical concept of social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital was applied in order to understand the importance of drinking and alcohol marketing in young peoples’ friendship groups and the significant role of SNS in symbolising valued drinking practices within and between peer groups.

Methods

The project proceeded through three phases:

Phase 1: A content analysis of SNS (Facebook, Twitter) alcohol marketing and user interaction with brands (N=5) popular among young people was conducted. This was then compared to the use of SNS by UK based SNS alcohol promotion campaigns.

Phase 2: In-depth focus group discussions with friendship groups of young people (16-21 years) (N=70) were conducted to explore the role of SNS and official and peer generated alcohol content in their drinking cultures and individual and peer group identities.

Phase 3: A content analysis of young people’s (N=43) Facebook profiles was conducted to examine how alcohol featured as part of their online identities and friendship networks.

Findings

SNS alcohol marketing and young people

The selected alcohol brands were utilising SNS (most often Facebook) as an important part of their multi-platform marketing strategies. A variety of distinct techniques were being used to make brands relevant to potential consumers and to encourage interaction and viral marketing. For example, lifestyle and gendered associations, competitions, real life/offline events, celebrity endorsement, drink recipes and personalisation. Alcohol was portrayed as a normal aspect of everyday life and leisure and indirectly associated with intoxication through the sponsorship of events located in environments in which drunkenness is likely (e.g. nightclubs). Price promotions/offers were rarely used. There was no evidence that SNS marketing of analysed brands was in breach of the current UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing (CAP Code). SNS users regularly interacted with brand content through liking and viewing brand pages, sharing and commenting on official brand content and creating user generated content upon request (e.g. offline event photos). As a result, the distinction between official and user generated content was blurred. It is such interaction and blurring which differentiates new media marketing from traditional marketing in that users help create and advertise brand content to their peers. Thus, SNS users are marketing alcohol brands as cultural and symbolic items to their online peers, which may influence peer norms around alcohol and peer group drinking cultures and mediate the relationship between alcohol advertising exposure and drinking practices.
There was little reference to responsible drinking and advice within brand content. Other than reference to the industry funded Drinkaware website, reference to responsible drinking, alcohol units or the potential health effects of alcohol consumption were absent from marketing content. Alcohol based health promotion campaigns were less prominent on SNS than alcohol marketing, received less user engagement and did not appear to be directly targeting young people. Thus, campaign presence on SNS is relatively low and takes place within an environment saturated by alcohol brands.

Young people showed indifference to alcohol marketing, yet were highly knowledgeable on SNS advertising and engaged with marketing content for personal gain. They entered competitions and used alcohol brand lifestyle associations as a signifier of identity which could be represented and reinforced on SNS. Young people also actively engaged with local nightlife events marketing on SNS to a greater extent than brand marketing as it provided a means of being informed on future popular events. Local event marketers were contributing to young people’s online drinking identities by taking drinking photographs of young people which would later be uploaded to SNS. This strategy encouraged young people to further interact with the event/venue SNS marketing.

The potential influence of alcohol marketing on drinking practices was recognised by participants, yet young people framed themselves as active agents who could navigate marketing on their own terms. Marketing was felt to influence ‘others’, such as younger people and those less knowledgeable than themselves about the alcohol market. Some also held the opinion that being aware of advertising techniques reduced potential influence. However, young people’s level of economic capital (i.e., having the money to purchase alcohol and attend events) was highly influential on their drinking patterns and practices. The cost of alcohol was an important factor in determining whether young people drank and what brand was consumed. Cheap supermarket offers were influential and the main way in which marketing influenced young people’s use of alcohol. Not having the economic capital to fund a night out was overcome by pre-loading on cheap alcoholic drinks on offer in supermarkets. Pre-loading was not only valued economically, but was regarded as an ‘ideal’ contexts for taking drinking photos and subsequently uploading to SNS to be viewed by peers as a form of symbolic capital.

**The creation of alcohol-related identities and the role of SNS in youth drinking cultures**

Alcohol consumption and related practice acted as forms of cultural, symbolic and social capital for young people. A number of alcohol-related factors such as drinking patterns and alcohol-related experience (e.g., humorous experiences and stories of intoxication, brand association, attendance at alcohol events, drinking locations and contexts) provided cultural capital and a means for young people to conform to peer group values, whilst distinguishing themselves from others (e.g., younger people, the opposite sex, drink choice). When valued and symbolically recognised by the peer group through SNS, such experiences generated social capital, inclusion and distinctive drinking lifestyles and identities.

SNS played an important role in both young people’s friendship networks and their drinking culture. Displaying Facebook alcohol content was a normal and routine aspect of young peoples’ drinking experiences and such content was popular among peers, receiving positive feedback and appraisal. Crucially, SNS appear to act as an extension of the space in which symbolic meaning can be created from the display of cultural drinking capital through SNS content such as photographs and statuses. These digital environments allowed young people to act out their individual and group identities to a peer audience and provided additional opportunities for shaping drinking cultures and alcohol-related identities. The depiction of drinking and related behaviours on SNS was a highly managed practice. Young people carefully used
and managed SNS content to create and display the “right” form of cultural capital with the knowledge of numerous audiences (e.g., peers, parents).

Drinking locations, drinks and contexts provided opportunities for young people to acquire social and cultural capital within the peer group, in ways that were age related, classed and gendered in nature. SNS had a key role in documenting the consumption of specific drinks and participation in certain drinking locations and contexts to peers, which worked in a way to reinforce status and group identities. Representing participation in the night time environment and pre-loading on SNS was highly valued, particularly among young women. They were regarded as “ideal” contexts for taking drinking photos and subsequently uploading to SNS to be viewed by peers as a form of symbolic capital. For young women Facebook was an extension of the context through which they performed and created specific types of gendered identities through drinking and drinking occasions. Such identities were displayed to the peer group through Facebook, potentially reinforcing and reproducing the role of alcohol as a key aspect of gendered identity.

Various interconnected forms of drinking capital worked in a way to both include and exclude young people from the peer group based on drinking experience and practice. For many young people, alcohol use, brand association, participating in events where alcohol was consumed and experiencing intoxication, acted as a form of symbolic capital, inclusion and social capital within the context of the peer group. SNS played a vital role in reinforcing the importance of particular forms of drinking capital to group belonging. Not depicting the ‘right’ form of cultural drinking capital on SNS influenced young people’s social status within the peer group and led to them feeling excluded. Thus, the need to feel included and a sense of belonging to group identities may influence the extent to which young people actively try to acquire capital through participating in particular types of drinking practice.

Conclusions and Implications

Social Network Sites (SNS) provide a new marketing opportunity for the alcohol industry to engage with potential customers (Nicholls, 2012; Winpenny et al., 2014). Although there are strong associations between exposure to traditional alcohol advertising and young people’s own alcohol use (Anderson et al., 2009; Smith and Foxcroft, 2009; Babor et al., 2010; Gordon et al., 2010), there is a lack of comparable research investigating novel marketing modalities. The association is likely to be complex as young people have reported finding online marketing informative and useful (Institute of Policy Research, 2013), whilst online peer networks play a mediating role in SNS alcohol marketing (Atkinson et al., 2011; Nicholls, 2012). Longitudinal research is required that examines the impact of SNS marketing on potential consumers, including young people. In an ever changing environment of SNS alcohol marketing, both brand and user generated content present challenges to existing reactive regulatory codes. SNS alcohol marketing is rapidly changing and prominent in real time for shorter periods than traditional media. As such, content appears and disappears on a daily or even an hourly basis, reducing the time frame in which content might be judged and regulated (Nicholls, 2012). Thus, relying on self and public regulation (through complaints) of such media designed for traditional media may be inadequate. This also poses challenges for proportionate policy development, that supports individual freedom of interaction and expression within SNS but mitigates against potentially unhealthy marketing practices. Finland, for example, is to introduce a complete formal alcohol marketing ban on social media for its citizens, which would prevent consumer participation in typical SNS based marketing practices. However, this would not apply to informal ‘marketing’ and personal communications and activities such as those reported by the young participants in our research.
In keeping with the findings of previous studies (Atkinson et al., 2011; Nichols, 2012) there was a relative lack of SNS based alcohol health promotion campaigns. As part of multi-component approaches, SNS health promotion may offer a useful opportunity to engage young people with public health messages, but the current research suggests that this is not being achieved. Campaigns must appropriate young people’s online cultures as successfully as industry marketers and work to increase their presence within pro-alcohol intoxigenic environments. As our research has shown, young people’s cultures of drinking and intoxication vary and are related to age, class and gender. As such, generic health campaigns may fail to engage young people. Moreover, findings show that when negative aspects of intoxication featured in young people’s drinking discourse, they were turned into positive cultural capital and framed as humorous in the creation of drinking stories. Thus, campaigns that solely focus on the potential negative aspects of drinking are unlikely to engage young drinkers. Designing and evaluating campaigns with messages that reflect and engage with various youth drinking cultures that are disseminated on SNS are required. However, short of a ban on all SNS alcohol related marketing (such as with the Finnish model described above), doing so within the space of SNS that is saturated with advanced and well-funded alcohol marketing and peer generated content will prove difficult.

It has also been suggested that SNS marketing and peer content may contribute to the normalisation of youth drinking behaviour through the creation of ‘intoxigenic digital spaces’ in which young people learn about alcohol (Griffiths et al., 2010, p528, Nichols, 2012; McCleanor et al., 2013; Institute of Policy Research, 2013). Research in this area is slowly accumulating, yet there remains a lack of theoretically informed qualitative research in the UK context which considers young peoples’ experiences and perspectives. This research addressed this gap by exploring the place of SNS in young people’s drinking culture, and the influence of peer generated alcohol content in the construction of alcohol-related identities. With SNS being integral to young people’s peer drinking cultures, and an extension of young people’s peer interaction, they are an important additional factor in the formation of social norms and ‘capital’ around alcohol within the peer context. As individuals enter the late teenage years, peers have an increasingly important influence on attitudes to drinking and drinking practices, which may be heightened by depictions on SNS (Velleman, 2009; Atkinson et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2012; Institute of Policy Research 2013). If holding certain types of cultural drinking capital is perceived as important to the peer group as a way of being accepted, belonging (social capital) and creating group identities, acquiring drinking experience and symbolising these experiences online may encourage young people to partake in particular drinking practices.

The study highlights the complex social processes that influence young people’s alcohol culture in a digital world. Our findings develop the concept of ‘peer pressure’ and frames young people as active agents in the process of acquiring alcohol-related experience as a form of capital in the construction of their individual and group identities, rather than passive individuals absorbing external pressures to drink. In order to effectively respond to young people’s drinking, an understanding of the changing digital context in which young people use alcohol as a way of creating (gendered, classed and age-related) identities through the process of capital accumulation may prove useful.
Further Information

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References


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