

COMMENTARY

Alcohol industry arguments for putting profit before health in the midst of a pandemic: The Western Australian experience

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Abstract

*In an effort to limit the impact of alcohol on the Western Australian (WA) health system during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the WA Government introduced temporary restrictions on takeaway alcohol purchases for several weeks in March and April 2020. In response, alcohol industry representatives encouraged the WA Government to remove the restrictions and replace them with a voluntary alcohol industry initiative. We looked at alcohol industry representatives' comments in media and online publications during this period. We found that the industry framed alcohol as an essential product, focused on the impact of the restrictions on WA businesses and framed the restrictions as complex and ineffective. The themes and arguments we identified are commonly used by the alcohol industry and are not unique to the pandemic. The alcohol industry's response to the COVID-19 restrictions in Australia provides a unique case study of how the alcohol industry attempts to interfere in public health policy. [Keric D, Stafford J. Alcohol industry arguments for putting profit before health in the midst of a pandemic: The Western Australian experience. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2020]*

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Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has raised the profile of public health prevention and catalyzed health to be one of the key priorities in our everyday lives. Not surprisingly, alcohol has been a topic of significant interest during the pandemic. Around the world and in Australia, governments have acted to either help the alcohol industry through the pandemic or to help deal with the strain that alcohol use places on health and law enforcement services [1]. Given the increased focus of the world on public health and the impacts of COVID-19 on the alcohol industry, the pandemic provides a good opportunity to consider alcohol industry activities and arguments to influence public health measures.

Western Australian Response to the Pandemic

In an effort to limit the impact of alcohol-related harm on the health system during the pandemic, the

Western Australian (WA) Government introduced temporary restrictions on takeaway alcohol purchases on 25 March 2020. In announcing the restrictions, the WA Premier, the Hon Mark McGowan MLA, noted, 'Alcohol-related issues take up an enormous amount of resources in our health system. These are resources we simply cannot afford to spare during the COVID-19 situation' [2]. The move was widely welcomed and supported by health groups, particularly as the restrictions helped to convey the message that alcohol is a preventable burden on the health system. The limits permitted the purchase of up to around 57 standard drinks per person per day (see Table 1).

Just 6 days after the WA restrictions came into effect, Retail Drinks Australia (RDA), the body that represents the interests of liquor retailers, introduced a voluntary national initiative that limited the amount of alcohol customers could purchase in one transaction, with the aim of preventing panic buying [3]. The voluntary initiative permitted the purchase of around

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Table 1. Comparison of Western Australian Government liquor restrictions and Retail Drinks Australia voluntary limits

Western Australian Government restrictions [2]		Retail Drinks Australia voluntary initiative [3]	
Product category	Quantity limits	Product category	Quantity limits
Beer, cider or pre-mix spirits	1 carton (case) = 24 cans/bottles	Beer	2 cases
		Cider	2 cases
		Pre-mix spirits, ready-to-drink	2 cases
Bottled wine	3 bottles	Bottled wine	12 bottles
Spirits	1 litre	Spirits	2 bottles, not to exceed 2 litres in total
Fortified wine	1 litre	Cask wine	2 casks, not to exceed 10 litres in total
A combination of any two of the above is permitted but not a combination of two of the same product.		Customers can purchase up to the total limit in any two of the above product categories.	

150 standard drinks per person per transaction; however, it did not apply in WA because of the government-introduced limits.

The WA Government removed the state-wide restrictions on takeaway alcohol purchases several weeks after their introduction, on 20 April 2020, following intense pressure by the alcohol industry for the WA restrictions to be replaced with the voluntary initiative [4]. A week later, RDA announced the conclusion of its voluntary initiative [5].

As takeaway liquor restrictions have largely ended, we now have an opportunity to consider the arguments that the alcohol industry used to encourage the WA Government to lift takeaway alcohol restrictions and how the alcohol industry framed public discussion about the restrictions.

Alcohol Industry Response to Takeaway Alcohol Restrictions

We looked at alcohol industry representatives' comments about takeaway alcohol sales in media and online publications between the introduction of the WA Government liquor restrictions and the conclusion of the RDA voluntary initiative.

Framing alcohol as an essential product

Alcohol was framed as an essential product, including for the economy, for the Australian culture and for mental health and wellbeing. For example, a representative of Australian Grape and Wine said, 'It's [alcohol is] a way of life for many Australians and in moderation it's good for your health' [6]. RDA noted that 'If we want people to stay at home, if we want them in a

good state of mental health with a conviviality that encourages them to adhere to social isolation, we've got to ensure they have access to the social norms such as enjoying a drink' [6].

Focusing on the impact of restrictions on WA businesses

The impact of the restrictions on WA businesses was commonly mentioned by alcohol industry representatives. A key argument was that the WA Government restrictions unfairly disadvantaged WA businesses, as the limits did not apply to interstate sellers. For example, the Liquor Stores Association WA claimed, 'In their current form, the WA Government's alcohol purchasing restrictions clearly discriminate against Western Australian businesses and benefit their interstate competitors' [7]. This point was commonly used to encourage the WA Government to replace its restrictions with the voluntary initiative, with the RDA noting, 'We would urge the WA Government to adopt the same measures as Retail Drinks' voluntary initiative in its next review so that WA retailers are able to compete on a level playing field' [7].

Further, the impact of restrictions on an already-struggling industry was highlighted in various comments. For example, Australian Hotels Association WA noted, 'WA's hotels and hospitality businesses have incurred immeasurable financial costs associated with COVID-19 so it is important that they do not face any unnecessary and counterproductive restrictions' [8].

Framing WA restrictions as complex and ineffective

The WA restrictions were framed as complex, confusing, too strict and ineffective and industry comments

raised concern that the WA limits could be counter-productive. For example, RDA argued, ‘The WA limits are complex and confusing and so low they are likely to lead to an increase in shopping, which is the exact opposite of what we’re meant to be doing at the moment’ [6].

The restrictions were also described as being easily circumvented. A Perth distillery owner argued, ‘I do believe people who are going to drink irresponsibly will still do so and this ruling will only serve to hurt our industry’ [9]. The RDA appeared to have a similar view: ‘The reality of any purchasing limits is that a person could easily travel to a number of liquor outlets in a single day and purchase well beyond the imposed limits, without fear of penalty’ [7].

The ‘strictness’ of the approach in WA was used to encourage the WA Government to lift the restrictions. RDA noted, ‘Retail Drinks’ voluntary initiative has already been successful in preventing panic buying with sales no longer at the peak trading seen a few weeks ago, demonstrating that these desired outcomes can be achieved without the stricter purchase limits the WA Government has imposed on its own retailers’ [10].

Similarities to Broader Alcohol Industry Strategies

The themes and arguments identified here are commonly used by the alcohol industry. Framing alcohol as having a positive effect on society and the economy, as being part of everyday life and as good for health is a common industry strategy and is not unique to the pandemic [11]. These types of arguments are particularly concerning as they are not consistent with the evidence of harms from alcohol and health advice. For example, the national low-risk drinking guidelines advise that alcohol does not relieve stress and can worsen mental health outcomes [12].

Self-regulation is commonly used by the alcohol industry to delay and prevent enforceable government regulation, including for alcohol marketing [13]. Given that alcohol was framed by the industry as an essential service and that the voluntary initiative was introduced shortly after the WA Government announcement, it’s possible that the voluntary initiative was introduced to forestall any government intervention in other jurisdictions. It is worth noting that the WA Government restrictions and the voluntary initiative had differing aims; while the WA Government restrictions recognised alcohol as a preventable health burden and aimed to reduce its impact on the health system, the voluntary initiative aimed to prevent stockpiling of alcohol, which framed the issue of concern as being

about panic buying, rather than the health system burden.

Alcohol industry representatives commonly criticise public health measures as being ineffective or too strict despite evidence of their effectiveness [14]. While the WA takeaway liquor restrictions were somewhat limited in that they did not apply to interstate retailers, the WA Government needed to act quickly to respond to a crisis situation and likely wasn’t in a position to fine-tune the policy before its introduction. Online sales of alcohol by interstate sellers are also beyond the scope of the existing WA liquor laws, so action in this area would have taken longer. Nevertheless, in lifting the restrictions, the WA Racing and Gaming Minister, the Hon Paul Papalia MLA, highlighted, ‘These measures were put in place to ensure those essential workers could focus on the State’s response to COVID-19, and the WA public has acted commendably during this period’, suggesting that the restrictions were effective in achieving their aim [15].

The alcohol industry’s response to the COVID-19 restrictions in Australia provides a unique case study of how the alcohol industry attempts to interfere in public health policy. While the example is from a specific time period and unprecedented circumstances, it contributes to the existing evidence base of how the alcohol industry frames public discussion of health policy.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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