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Alcohol Industry

The Impact of the Alcohol Industry's CRS Initiatives on drinking behaviour and road safety

Introduction

Alcohol is recognised as a significant contributor to human trauma. Its consumption is associated with social, economic, and environmental impacts hindering 13 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 52 targets including child health and road injuries (WHO, 2020). Harmful use of alcohol is defined by the World Health Organisation as *“drinking that causes detrimental health and social consequences for the drinker, the people around the drinker and society at large as well as the patterns of drinking that are associated with increased risk of adverse health outcomes”*.

The Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health indicates that harmful use of alcohol was responsible for approximately 1.7 million deaths from non-communicable diseases in 2016, including 370,000 deaths from road crash injuries (WHO, 2018).

Many companies in the alcohol industry, like other corporate sectors, undertake corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives which are intended to limit the damage caused by alcohol. However, there is growing concern in the public health community about the efficacy and intent of these CSR activities. Existing research on CSR points to the misleading nature of CSR practices and how they may form part of the alcohol industry's broader political and corporate strategies. This fact sheet provides information on the inherent divergence between alcohol-related CSR activities and internationally acknowledged evidence-based practices for reducing harmful drinking and reducing drink driving related road trauma.

Effects of CSR activities within the Alcohol industry

The commercial activities of the alcohol industry are in direct contradiction to those of the public health and road safety community.

- Reviews of the most effective and cost-effective strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm, including drink-driving, found that alcohol taxes and banning alcohol advertising were the most effective (Anderson et al., 2009). However, these interventions are also the ones that the alcohol industry is least likely to support (Rodríguez-Martos, 2006).
- The findings from several studies suggest that rather than reducing harmful drinking, the initiatives undertaken by alcohol companies might have the opposite effect (Mialon and McCambridge, 2018). As found by Smith et al. (2006) and Pettigrew et al. (2016), young people shown “responsible drinking messages” for example, viewed them as glamorising alcohol consumption and as being similar to marketing. This is particularly problematic because exposure to alcohol marketing is associated with earlier drinking initiation among youth and a greater intensity of drinking among those already drinking (Jernigan et al., 2017).



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- Esser et al., (2016) found that less than 1% of the industry's actions to reduce drink driving aligned with evidence-based recommendations, whereas more than 80% of the industry's actions contained possible marketing components, such as branded materials, branded taxis, and corporate promotion in campaigns (Esser et al., 2016).
- Evidence-based drink driving policies which establish a general Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) level and that are effectively enforced are proven to reduce road crash death and injury (GRSP, 2007; WHO, 2017). There is also strong evidence of effectiveness of drink driving policies reducing alcohol consumption and harmful drinking among drivers (WHO, 2018). Yet, the alcohol industry relies on the harmful use of alcohol for sales and profits (Cuong et al 2018). This fact underpins the conflict of interest which leads the alcohol industry to de-emphasise evidence-based policies to reduce drink driving rates, because the adoption of such policies would negatively influence profits from the sale of alcohol (Rodriguez-Martos, 2006). In fact, researchers point to alcohol industry opposition as one of the key reasons for the lack of effective drink driving policies in low- and middle-income countries (Esser et al, 2016).
- Pervasive alcohol marketing and advertising has a detrimental effect on communities, particularly on young people. A review that examined alcohol advertising bans from 20 countries across 26 years indicated reductions in binge drinking by 42%, and reductions in underage monthly alcohol consumption by up to 24% (Smith et al, 2009).
- For drink driving specifically, in a review of 266 Corporate Social Responsibility Actions (CSR), researchers found that whilst the alcohol industry reported evaluations of approximately one-third of their initiatives, only 3% of these evaluations measured outcomes to establish effectiveness in reducing drink driving (Esser et al., 2016).
- In another study, researchers found that alcohol industry activities yielded many benefits to corporate donors in terms of social media and website usage and that "brand stretching" was involved in many of the activities (Yoon and Lam, 2013).
- In the political context, concern has been expressed about the role of the alcohol industry in trying to influence policy. A case study of draft national policies in Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, and Botswana found that the alcohol industry had a pivotal role in policy development, resulting in proposed policies that served the industry's interests, with a disproportionate focus on economic benefits and, importantly, a lack of evidence-based population-level interventions for effectively reducing the harmful use of alcohol (Bakke and Endal, 2010).



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Conclusion

A review of the literature reveals that there is significant investment by the alcohol industry in activities that are claimed to be part of the industry's corporate social responsibility initiatives. However, the majority of initiatives supported by the alcohol industry are not evidence-based and do not reduce alcohol-related harm. Most initiatives claimed under the banner of corporate social responsibility serve as marketing opportunities for the alcohol industry in order to maximise profit. Effective investment by the industry should focus on supporting evidence-based interventions that demonstrably reduce alcohol-related harm; for example, through commitments to a minimum alcohol pricing structure, and commitments to support reductions in illegally traded alcohol (Anderson et al., 2009) rather than through alcohol marketing, ineffective drink driving control measures, and/or influencing policy to maximise profit.

The commercial activities of the alcohol industry are in contradiction to those of the road safety community. Most of the alcohol industry's actions to reduce drink driving and improve road safety lack evidence of effectiveness and/or have not been sufficiently studied. The industry argues that they are, as the supporter of road safety CSR, a legitimate road safety actor and therefore has a right to participate in road safety policy-making. However, as illustrated, it is not a legitimate actor because its objectives are in direct conflict with the evidence-based objectives of the road safety community.



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