

Are bottle shops using Twitter to increase advertising or encourage drinking during COVID-19?

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In Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic led to sweeping public health measures to reduce community transmission. These measures included preventing on-site alcohol venues (e.g. bars and pubs) operating during periods of higher community transmission. But, throughout the pandemic, packaged liquor retailers (or 'bottle shops') remained open with few restrictions apart from self-imposed purchasing limits to deter 'panic buying' and social distancing among customers and staff.

Preliminary reports suggest retailers took advantage of COVID-19 on social media to promote alcohol consumption, with findings indicating that alcohol advertisements were displayed approximately every 35 seconds on Facebook and Instagram during a one-hour period on a Friday night.^{1,2} The report, however, was limited to examining sponsored advertising posts on Facebook and Instagram via a personal account for a short period. This reduces the generalisability of the report's findings, as social media activity fluctuates even over single days. Furthermore, while the study focused on sponsored posts, it did not examine non-sponsored posts that appear on liquor retailer social media profiles.

Therefore, to further understand the advertising practices of alcohol retailers during the first COVID-19 lockdown period and to circumvent some of the shortcomings of the prior report, we aimed to examine all posts on an alternative social media platform – Twitter – by packaged liquor retailers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. We

Abstract

Objective: Preliminary reports suggested that liquor retailers used COVID-19 to promote alcohol through sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram. To further understand the advertising practices during this period, we aimed to determine whether packaged liquor retailers increased their posts during COVID-19 or used COVID-19 to promote alcohol on Twitter.

Methods: 'Tweets' (Twitter posts) from all packaged liquor retailers in NSW written since 2018 were collected. Tweets written during the first COVID-19 lockdown period were coded for: references of COVID-19, types of marketing message, use of links to online stores and use of an alcohol-related 'meme'.

Results: There was no evidence of increased tweet frequency, however, some COVID-specific alcohol advertising was detected that leveraged the pandemic (4.0%) or referencing the pandemic without explicitly promoting alcohol (12.0%). The most popular market messages used in the tweets were encouraging alcohol use (15.4%) and easy access to alcohol at home (9.5%).

Conclusions: At least on Twitter, there was no marked increase in posts from packaged liquor retailers in NSW and only some tweets used COVID-19 to promote alcohol.

Implications for public health: The use of COVID-specific alcohol marketing on social media raises important considerations for legislative and regulatory requirements, particularly during major health events such as a pandemic.

Key words: COVID-19, alcohol, packaged liquor retailers, bottle shops, advertising, Twitter

aimed to determine if there was an increased frequency of advertising through non-sponsored posts on this platform compared to previous periods and whether retailers were using COVID-specific alcohol marketing.

Methods

Packaged liquor retailers were identified from the Liquor and Gaming NSW premises list (April 2020),³ with retailer trade names used to search Twitter for an account. We identified

77 (4.5%) Twitter accounts across 1,724 unique packaged liquor retailers (i.e. a retailer with multiple licences across venues) from the 2,655 retailer licences in NSW. To collect tweets from each retailer's Twitter account, we used the R package RTweet⁴ to interact with Twitter's application programming interface (API).

The frequency of tweets was examined between January to April 2020 and compared to the same period during the preceding two years. Tweets covering the first COVID-19

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lockdown period (13 March 2020 to 30 April 2020) were coded by two researchers (DW and BG). Using the previous reports to guide our coding, the tweets were coded for: a) references to COVID-19; b) the type of marketing message (i.e. saving money, encouraging larger purchases; using the coding scheme from the initial report,² see Table 1 for an overview of codes); c) whether they included a link to an online store; and d) whether they included an internet 'meme' (i.e. a captioned picture or video, often of a humorous nature, that is posted on social media) with alcohol-related content.

Results

At the time of data collection, there were 64,970 followers across the 77 identified Twitter accounts, with a median of 843 (IQR= 272.5–2052.5) followers. Descriptive statistics comparing the frequency of packaged liquor retailer tweets showed no discernible increase in the tweets posted between January and April 2020 compared to the same period in the preceding two years (see Figure 1).

COVID-specific messaging and marketing

Of the 749 tweets written during the first lockdown, 44% received at least one like and 18% were retweeted. Of the tweets, we found that only 4% leveraged the pandemic to market alcohol (i.e. "As it is corona time every day now is #winesday, so stay home and get #getitdelivered"), while 12% referenced the pandemic without explicitly using it to

promote alcohol (i.e. "Stay safe everyone. We are open but require masks"). In contrast, 84% of tweets did not reference the COVID-19 pandemic or related terms (e.g. isolation).

When analysing all of the tweets between 13 March and 30 April 2020, similar to the previous report,² we identified tweets that contained messaging such as: easy access to alcohol at home (9.5%); saving money (3.6%); encouraging larger purchases (3.6%); encouraging alcohol consumption (15.4%); and using alcohol to cope, 'survive' or feel better (3.3%; see Table 1 for examples). Further, 11.9% of tweets included a link directly to the retailer's online store, with another 3.1% linking to a similar post on another social media platform (e.g. Instagram) where a link to an online store was provided.

Alcohol-related internet memes were also identified, representing nearly 10% (n=72) of all tweets, but were only from three packaged liquor retailer Twitter accounts. Themes identified within the memes included relying on alcohol to cope or survive, linking alcohol to fun or love, and encouraging alcohol consumption, among others.

Discussion

We found that only a small number of packaged liquor retailers had an active Twitter account and, of those who did, there was no evidence of an increase in tweet frequency since the emergence of COVID-19. We did, however, observe some COVID-specific alcohol advertising through Twitter.

When analysing the content of tweets written during the first lockdown, we found that the most popular messages used were 'encouraging alcohol use' and 'easy access to alcohol at home'. While similar themes were also the most popular messages used on Facebook and Instagram,² these themes occurred less often on Twitter. This may indicate that either there is a difference in how retailers use the platforms, or because the initial report only included sponsored content. Indeed, our analysis included all tweets and included messages where Twitter was used to respond and engage with members of the public, which is likely to be different to how retailers use sponsored content.

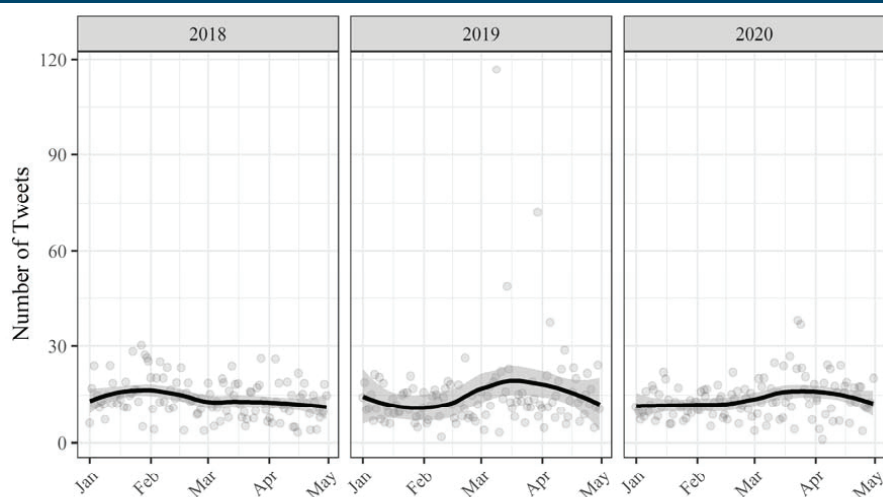
The focus on all content on a liquor retailer's social media page may be important, as they may not be strictly considered 'advertising'. Attempts to promote alcohol consumption or the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism may be particularly damaging as the pandemic, and lockdown orders, have increased social isolation and distress and mental health risk.^{5,6} Therefore, it should also be considered if such tweets are compliant with relevant legislation, regulations, or industry codes regarding the promotion of liquor (e.g. the NSW *Liquor Act 2007*). While we are not alleging the tweets reviewed for this study are in breach of any legislation, regulation or industry code, we suggest that greater scrutiny of online advertising and social media posts be considered to ensure compliance, particularly during future instances of lockdown.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study was to include all Twitter accounts from packaged liquor retailers in NSW (some of which are major national retailers), rather than examining sponsored advertising posts on a personal social media account. Sponsored advertising on social media often targets individuals based on personal user metrics (i.e. demographics, interests, attitudes, search history), and thus can exclude (or include) specific posts to a user. We also note that as these results are from NSW liquor retailer accounts, they may not be applicable Australia-wide or to other countries. Further, identified strategies and tactics on social media by liquor retailers may have changed since the first wave of the pandemic.

Future research should consider using multiple social media platforms via platform

Figure 1: Number of Tweets posted by packaged liquor retailers per day during January–April, 2018–2020. The solid line depicts the smoothed mean (method = 'loess', span = .75). The shaded ribbon represents the 95% confidence interval of the smoothed mean.



APIs, including sponsored and non-sponsored content. However, at the time of data collection, access to the Facebook and Instagram APIs were heavily restricted following the Cambridge Analytica data scandal.⁷

Conclusion

Liquor retailers in NSW did not increase advertising through non-sponsored posts on Twitter during the first wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Tweets that leveraged the pandemic to market alcohol, encouraged at-home purchases or increased consumption, and other market messages were detected. However, these tweets occurred less frequently compared to other reports on sponsored social media posts. The emergence of COVID-specific marketing raises important considerations regarding the compliance of sponsored and non-sponsored social media posts in relation to legislative or regulatory requirements and industry compliance codes, particularly during major health events, such as a pandemic.

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Table 1. Examples of Tweets from packaged liquor retailers in NSW regarding the use of 1) COVID-19 related content, and 2) marketing messages. Note that quotes included are slightly changed and truncated, as per recommended practice.⁸

Theme	Example Tweets
COVID-19 Related Content	
Mention of COVID-19 related content to market alcohol	<p>"This choice of wine is absolutely delicious with a great finish #lockdownwine."</p> <p>"Our customers are reminding us to be happy during these difficult times. Here's . . . stocking up on the essentials [image including a large box of wine]."</p> <p>" . . . at home on the #Quarantinis. Stay safe, stay home and get it delivered #lockdown."</p> <p>"You can support small business during COVID-19 . . . here's a list of wine sale deals . . ."</p> <p>"Are you set with your alcohol and toilet paper? Get your alcohol here . . . #stockpile #delivery #corona."</p>
Mention of COVID-19 related content without explicitly marketing alcohol	<p>"A quick note to let you know we are open for business as usual. . ."</p> <p>" . . . We have amped up hygiene and sanitisation in store. The safety of our staff and customers is our top priority . . ."</p> <p>"Yes . . . we remain open across all our stores, so take your time!"</p> <p>"The health department recommends washing your hands regularly, using sanitiser and keeping a safe distance so you can keep yourself and others safe . . ."</p>
No mention of COVID-19 related content	<p>"We are very happy to beat the price of a competing store . . ."</p> <p>"This wine is youthful & vibrant, with great drinkability . . ."</p> <p>"Thanks for getting in touch with us . . . sorry for any inconvenience with your delivery."</p> <p>"I can recommend that wine. It's really delicious and luscious."</p> <p>"New beers are in stock @[venue name]."</p>
Marketing Messages	
Easy to access alcohol at home	<p>"We sell vodka, and can deliver in 30 minutes."</p> <p>"We are open and ready to stock your pantry . . . delivery is available daily!"</p> <p>" . . . Home delivery for everyone!"</p> <p>"We offer free deliver in most metropolitan areas. . ."</p>
Saving money	<p>"The price of this case is heavily discounted."</p> <p>"Great choice, and a great value pack of beer."</p> <p>"We have a social media only offer that can only be accessed via our socials. Here's the link . . . to access the deal."</p> <p>"We have a happy hour sale tomorrow . . . get your beers from . . ."</p>
Encouraging larger purchases	<p>"Best friends always care if you have wine at home . . . I always keep my house stocked."</p> <p>"We can send up to 15 bottles of wine to you in a case."</p> <p>"You can even build your own case of wine online of your choice. Visit our website."</p> <p>"If you haven't had this wine, grab some bottles before it is sold out [link to online webpage to purchase wine]."</p>
Encouraging alcohol consumption	<p>"May your wine glass never be empty."</p> <p>"Who needs to have some wine?"</p> <p>"Well, you might have to put another order through then. [in response to customer who has finished their case of wine in a short period of time]."</p> <p>"I'm not addicted. I'm just in a very committed relationship to wine [image of people celebrating and drinking]."</p>
Using alcohol to cope, 'survive' or feel better	<p>" . . . hold the ones you love at these difficult times [image of alcohol included in post]."</p> <p>"Wine is our best cure for the blues!"</p> <p>"Happiness is wine, or wine is happiness?"</p> <p>"Wine; it relaxes the mind."</p>