

#DrinkResponsibly: Is it Old Wine of Advertising in the New Bottle of Social Media?

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What could be wrong with a good message like “drink responsibly?” Nothing, if it were directed to those drinking alcohol in a bar. However, if this message packaged with cool visuals featuring alcoholic beverages is directed to the general population who do not use alcohol, it is nothing less than dangerous.

This message is being promoted across social media with the hashtag (#drinkresponsibly). Instagram has close to a million posts with the hashtag as of November 2021. Most of these posts are from handles related to the alcohol industry. They feature images of celebrities, including women, alcoholic beverages with branding, and people bonding and having fun. They also post pictures of cultural events organized by them to initiate user-generated content to promote their products. What is concerning is that these posts are also being “promoted” by influencers to come into the feeds of people who do not follow handles related to the alcohol industry. These posts under the garb of “health

education” are nothing but advertisements in reality.¹

The “drink responsibly” message is one of the tools in the industry toolkit to promote the credibility of brands of alcoholic beverages. Therefore, the industry would support this messaging



over evidence-based effective policies like increasing taxes, restricting advertising, and maintaining control of the retail sale of alcohol. A message with an order like “drink” is more likely to increase the intent to use among nonusers than decrease alcohol-related harm. It is well recognized that the alcohol industry creates an impression of social responsibility with such messaging while promoting itself to maximize profits and campaigns against an effective policy like higher taxation.^{2,3}

Marketing on social media can lead to a positive attitude toward alcohol use, regular consumption of alcohol, engagement in heavy drinking, and future alcohol-related problems.⁴ It is also known that strategic ambiguous messages have a larger impact on drinking in vulnerable age groups like young people rather than the whole population. Given this evidence, marketing in social media cannot be taken lightly despite their message to drink responsibly.

The global burden of disease study showed that alcohol use is a major risk

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factor for both deaths and disability-adjusted life-years. The level of alcohol consumption that minimized health-related harm was zero standard drinks per week. It made a case for lowering population-level consumption through alcohol control policies.⁵ According to the magnitude of substance use survey, India's overall prevalence of alcohol use is 14.6% and is only 1.6% in females.⁶ The main reason why the industry features women in promoted posts in India is to target a hitherto untapped market of women, which has shown growth in the past few years.^{7,8} Advertising alcoholic beverages has been banned in India since 1995 as per the Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act. However, the alcohol industry resorted to surrogate advertising in the form of products like club soda, mineral water, music CDs, playing cards, etc. One can note its influence on Bollywood, with an increased depiction in recent decades of alcohol use on-screen by characters of positive roles and women.⁹ The industry has now started using social media sites like Instagram in a big way, as this space is still not regulated.

Social media platforms have a policy on alcohol but it is usually limited to age restriction and prohibition of sale and gifting of alcohol. There is no ban on the positive depiction of alcohol in the posts or discussions based on posted content.¹⁰ The alcohol industry has a form of self-regulation in the context of social media engagement. However, it is related to age restrictions, social monitoring, and user privacy and is not about marketing and promotion.¹¹ Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) guidelines state that celebrities should not promote products on which the law mandates a health warning in their advertisements or packaging. In the recent past, Mr. Amitabh Bachchan terminated a contract with a tobacco brand when he realized what he was doing came under surrogate advertising.¹² However, social media outrage by citizens may not keep all celebrities in check. In June 2021, guidelines were set up for social media influencers too.

These guidelines are, however, not stringent enough.¹³

In the context of ineffective forms of regulation by "Big Alcohol" and "Big Tech," the general population is vulnerable to the alcohol industry's clever ploys. The government needs to step in and create a regulatory framework to curb surrogate advertisements in social media. National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (NADPPR) plans to use media publicity to spread the message of the ill effects of substance use.¹⁴ In order to prevent alcohol use, the youth are educated using the social norms approach, correcting false notions about alcohol use.¹⁵ However, any gains would be undone by marketing done by the industry. The duplicitous strategies of the alcohol industry must be recognized and called out. The #drink responsibly should wake us to their strategy in India and call us to take needed action by regulating social media.

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