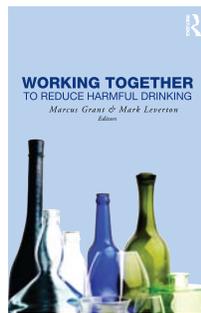


## MEDIA BACKGROUND

# A Worldwide Ban on Alcohol Advertising— Would It Stop Underage Drinking?

**Reducing harmful drinking: Book looks at the evidence about alcohol marketing and any correlation with harmful drinking—particularly by youth—and addresses the question of whether severe controls on marketing would achieve the objective of reducing problems.**

In ***Working Together to Reduce Harmful Drinking***, edited by Marcus Grant and Mark Leverton, the book's authors contend that reasonable regulation provides the context for good alcohol policy, excessive regulation often leads to unintended negative consequences, leading producers have a proud record of making positive contributions to implementing effective alcohol policies—but there are opportunities to do much more. ***Working Together*** is intended to contribute to the World Health Organization's (WHO) global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol.



One of the timely topics addressed by the book is the fact that some advocacy groups have proposed bans on alcohol advertising as a means of combating harmful drinking among young people. Although the alcohol producers are acutely aware of the serious problems from misuse of alcohol, Roger Sinclair explains why such bans would fail to have the desired impact. He also refutes the myths about the ineffectiveness of self-regulation.

### First of all, is there an established correlation between alcohol advertising and how/how much people drink?

- The reality of this issue is that, as summarized by Sinclair, “the relationship between marketing and drinking patterns has led researchers to quite different conclusions.” (*Chapter 4 by Roger Sinclair, p. 63*)
- The author does not dispute that serious problems can arise from the misuse of beverage alcohol, but focuses on the question of “whether the industry’s marketing activities contribute to the problem, and whether severe controls on marketing would achieve the objective of reducing harm.” (*Chapter 4, p. 64*)
- The balance of the evidence does not support a direct causal relationship between overall alcohol marketing and drinking levels or harmful drinking patterns.<sup>1</sup>

### Is there evidence that young people’s drinking is influenced by advertising?

- Over the years, the impact of alcohol marketing on young people has been extensively studied. (*Chapter 4, pp. 73–73*)
- One approach has been to examine the relationship between marketing and young people’s *attitudes and expectancies* about drinking. The results of these studies vary: Some found a small impact on young people’s beliefs about drinking and their intentions to drink, while others showed no such relationship.
- However, there is no evidence that marketing *causes* particular beliefs or intentions.
- *Econometric studies* have also looked at the relationship using economic methods, such as marketing expenditure. On balance, these studies failed to show a clear and causal relationship.
- Although recent reviews of *longitudinal studies* have linked the exposure to alcohol in media and advertising to the likelihood that adolescents will start to drink, it should be noted that any effect seen in the individual studies, where it was observed, was very small.
- Overall, the relationship between young people’s drinking and the many factors that influence it is extremely complex; no individual factor can be singled out, and each is influenced by many others.
- The evidence also shows consistently that other factors—e.g., family environment; parent, sibling, and peer behavior, and socioeconomic status—play a more significant role in shaping young peoples’ drinking than do advertising and other forms of marketing.
- Although research conclusions vary, the leading producers have imposed strict conditions on the nature of so-called “message content” and audience coverage of their promotional activities; this takes the form of codes that prohibit certain types of advertising claims or associations and require that the reach and coverage of media schedules be constructed to minimize the exposure to alcohol marketing of those underage.

### Could a complete ban on alcohol advertising make a difference?

- Country studies have not found a reduction in harmful drinking where there were advertising bans. (*Chapter 4, p. 79*)
- Among the research findings cited by Sinclair is the conclusion that “advertising bans do not have a large impact on drinking patterns”—this is based on a study of 17 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the period between 1977 and 1995.
- Moreover, where advertising is banned, there is typically a shift toward non-banned media.

<sup>1</sup> For a research overview and links to some studies mentioned here, see *ICAP Issue Briefing: Marketing and Young People* at <http://www.icap.org/PolicyTools/ICAPIssuesBriefings/>.

- Effects of several “natural experiments” of marketing restrictions have been assessed in different countries (see [ICAP Issue Briefing: Marketing and Young People](#)). For example:
  - After a 14-month ban of all alcohol advertising in British Columbia, Canada, in 1971, yearly and monthly analyses found no substantial effect on sales of beer, wine, or spirits.
  - Advertising and consumption were studied in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom between 1970 and 1983. Despite significant differences in alcohol advertising policies, alcohol consumption decreased in these countries.

### Isn't alcohol advertising already closely regulated in most countries?

- In developed countries, alcohol advertising is one of the most highly regulated types of marketing in the world. (*Chapter 4, pp. 74–82*)
- In addition to government controls, in both developed and developing markets, major alcohol producers are committed to operating within self- or co-regulatory frameworks designed to ensure responsible marketing as well as the marketing of *responsibility*.
- Government regulation and industry self-regulation are not mutually exclusive but intended to work in tandem; self-regulation is always set within a broader framework of government regulation.
- In many emerging markets, alcohol consumption remains relatively high even though much of the alcohol consumed is not marketed but is largely unbranded or not commercially produced.

### Why should we not be cynical about self-regulation?

Sinclair reviews five common myths about self-regulation and its effectiveness:

- 1) *“Self-regulation can ‘fix’ all the problems associated with harmful drinking”*: It cannot. While self-regulation is an essential part of the attempts to minimize harmful drinking, it is not sufficient on its own.
- 2) *“Self-regulation is just the industry sitting in judgment on itself”*: It is not—and should not be, as external bodies are created to administer the codes, review compliance, and update code provisions with input from other stakeholders, including governments and the public.
- 3) *“Codes of practice do not address public health concerns”*: In reality, the provisions of most codes are aligned with public health goals and apply at all stages of product development, packaging, and sale.
- 4) *“Self-regulation is incapable of removing noncompliant advertisements or products in a timely way”*: In fact, self-regulation can move much faster than a system that relies on legislation or using the courts to rule on complaints about marketing practices. A self-regulatory code can also be updated quickly, whereas making changes to existing legislation or pursuing cases before courts can be a long and complicated process.
- 5) *“The major drinks producers are opposed to working with governments and other stakeholders to extend and improve self-regulatory systems in parts of the world where they are*

*inadequate or do not exist.”* That is not the case, as, for example, the book *Working Together* demonstrates.

### What can alcohol producers do to make sure marketing and advertising are kept in check?

- Going forward, major alcohol producers can:
  - initiate an international survey of existing self-regulatory codes to establish where such practices do and do not exist;
  - offer its expertise, network of branches, and offices to assist governments to introduce self-regulatory bodies and codes where none exist or where they are poorly applied and persuade companies operating in regions without such codes to commit themselves to a self-regulatory regime;
  - encourage participants in its distribution channels to support self-regulatory organizations and their work;
  - build on its existing social marketing campaigns targeted at specific groups of consumers, for example young adults;
  - work to identify the new marketing approaches and technology to ensure that they are covered by responsible marketing codes;
  - approach the major world media companies to involve them in the campaign against harmful drinking. (*Chapter 4, pp. 82–85*)

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**More about the book: WORKING TOGETHER TO REDUCE HARMFUL DRINKING** is intended to contribute to the World Health Organization's (WHO) global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. It explores areas where alcohol producers' technical competence can and does make a positive contribution to reducing harmful drinking and where industry input has been welcomed by WHO. The book describes each of these areas: producing beer, wine, and spirits; addressing availability of noncommercial beverages; pricing, marketing, and selling beverage alcohol; encouraging responsible choices; and working with others. The final chapter sets out views of how alcohol producers can contribute to reducing harmful drinking in countries where they are present. The messages recurring throughout the book are that reasonable regulation provides the context for good alcohol policy, excessive regulation often leads to unintended negative consequences, leading producers have a proud record of making positive contributions to implementing effective alcohol policies—but there are opportunities to do much more. For additional information about the book and its supporting materials, please see [www.icap.org/Publications/WorkingTogether](http://www.icap.org/Publications/WorkingTogether)