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Consuming identities: Alcohol marketing and the comodification of youth identities

(short title: **Consuming Identities**)

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ABSTRACT

Marketing has successfully used the postmodern turn in conceptualisations of the human subject and incorporated contemporary theorising of identities and self into its understanding of the key drivers of consumption. Such developments clearly converge in alcohol marketing practices that target young people where commercialized youth identities available for consumption and engagement are a significant element. This paper reports data from young people that reflect the uptake of such identities and considers the challenges that these developments represent for public health and the wellbeing of young people.

(86 words)

Key words: marketing, alcohol, young people, identities, consumption, environments

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INTRODUCTION

...the old identities which stabilized the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject (Hall, 1992, p.274)

The major social changes that Stuart Hall is referring to have attracted an enormous scholarship and an upwelling of research on identities around the globe (Bauman, 1998; Billig, 1995; Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Wetherell, 2003), with youth identities being a key focus (Giddens, 2000; Griffiths, 2004; Hall, 1996; Miles, 2000; Rose, 1996). A central interest has been in the ways in which such changes have intersected with consumption. Warde (1994, p.879) argues that:

people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they possess and display.

There is concern that patterns of consumption increasingly reflect the transactions of symbolic meaning that are a key manifestation of contemporary representations of the

self. Rose (1996, p.146) summarises dangers for public good social science around these new relationships between consumption and self.

New modes, techniques and images of self formation and self problematization are disseminated, spatialised in new ways according to market segments and lifestyle choices, and operating according to the objectives of profit or pleasure, rather than national well-being.

Hall (1996) argues that identities are formed in narratives of self and are accordingly products of discursive practices that are historically and institutionally bound. Marketing and its outcome, consumption, are potent powers in this mix. In the contemporary setting they are important in the self-making projects that research argues are at the heart of contemporary human identities (Hall, 1996; Wetherell, 2003). Butler (1993), in particular, argues that the body is the main site at which the symbolism of consumption can be read by others for messages of belonging or exclusions; the clothes we wear, the foods we eat, the beverages we drink and the myriad of other choices we make. All these speak strongly of who we are or want to be and operate at multiple levels – individual, interpersonal, national – with salience highly context dependent.

In this paper we consider the way the developments in marketing practices impact on young people. We present findings from a research project investigating the meaning-making of young people around alcohol and identity. This qualitative project carried out discursive analyses on narrative accounts of alcohol, alcohol marketing and its uses

gathered from affinity groups of New Zealanders under the legal drinking age of 18 years. We argue that marketing materials and artifacts, have become a miasma in the ethereal identities and micro-cultures of our underage youth in ways that naturalise, normalize and encourage alcohol consumption. It is this marketing of identity in an environment of addictive consumerism to which our title refers; alcohol identities are being consumed by young people to an unprecedented extent. Unchecked, there are potentially devastating population health impacts as this generation and subsequent cohorts age. Our aim is to promote debate around the interweaving of marketing and the self making practices of young people and as a result stimulate public health responses to this complex threat.

For emerging generations of youth, managing transitions from childhood, the signals of identity are particularly powerful. Miles (2000, p.26) argues that the aggregate decisions of such cohorts in populations constitute lifestyles – “lived cultures in which individuals actively express their identities” – that manifest personal identities at the social level. Particular practices of consumption are a hallmark of the ways in which young people claim significance and meaning in their lives, creating micro-cultures and shaping identity and interpersonal status.

These developments in social practices and the theories that account for them, have been recognized and taken up as a new opportunity for commercial activity (Kasser & Kanner, 2003; Shuker, 2001) and have resulted in the emergence of a new field of study around consumption and consumerism, particularly in the emerging generations (Klein, 2000;

Schor, 2004). Bringing together the social science theorising of identity and the new understandings of consumption in behaviour, the marketing disciplines have injected important ideas and data into the praxis of commerce. Cova (1996) argues that “personal identity and community are no longer given but must be constructed on an everyday basis by the consumer” and notions such as ephemeral subjectivities, symbolic consumption, market fragmentation, information capitalism, unstable patterns of consumption are of growing importance in understanding such dynamics.(Van Raaij, 1993; Venkatesh, 1999).

CONTEMPORARY MARKETING THEORY

Cova (1996) argues that, after decades of pursuing the efficiencies available through mass marketing, marketing has now become more focused and localised. Rather than production, consumption is seen as driving sales and profits and is theorised as the main goal in marketing (Lash & Urry, 1994; Miller, 1995; Wilmshurst & Mackay, 2002).

While this change of focus takes in strategies such as niche marketing to population segments, the cutting edge conceptualizes it as the need “engineer permission to maintain dialogue with individuals” (Godin, 1999). With these changes come calls to rework the thinking behind the representation of products. Fournier (Fournier, 1998) argues for the consideration of the brand as a “direct relationship partner” with the consumer and Hanby (1999) suggests that brands be thought of as holistic and complex with human characteristics. Others reconceptualise the development of the brand in cultural (Holt, 1997) or interpersonal terms, with Roberts (2004) coining the phrase “love marks” to identify the most successful and enduring symbols.

Marketing professionals work from nuanced understandings of identities, lifestyle and market segments, conceptualising youth cultures as multiple, changing, and shaped by symbolic consumption (Brown, 1995; Cova & Cova, 2002; Holt, 1997; Thompson, 1997). In this setting the marketing mix, particularly product representation and meaning, is monitored carefully to maximise engagement with target consumer groups (Cova, 1996; Delrio, 1996; Viser, 1999). The vast resources at their disposal to enact and materialize the conceptual approaches sketched here contribute strongly to the tectonic shifts in human identity dynamics everywhere.

Consumer economies, with their supportive cultural matrices of production and marketing, are held responsible for undesirable impacts on cultures, human development social roles, identities, stress and mental health at both individual and group levels (Kasser & Kanner, 2003). Since the middle of the twentieth century, shifts toward consumerism have escalated discontents with materialism in wealthy societies, reported in broad psychosocial literatures (Kasser & Kanner, 2003; Klein, 2000). These stressors are most apparent among the young (Schor, 2004; Valkenburg, 2000). Popular terms such as ‘shopping addiction’ and ‘retail therapy’ are increasingly underpinned by research outlining fixation, obsession and “religious” relationships with particular brands, consumption and other manifestations of contemporary marketing (Muniz & Schau, 2005).

Beverage alcohol is high on the list of the branded products that people use to signal their identity and belonging. Multiple channels (events, television, websites, mobile phones, music, radio) through diverse modalities (advertising, branding, sponsorship) are used by alcohol marketing to influence the formation of youth identities in ways that orient strongly to increasing consumption of alcohol (Casswell, 2004)(Jernigan & O'Hara, 2004; McCreanor et al., 2005). Commercial interests in beverage alcohol, many of which are now transnational players (Babor et al., 2003; Jernigan & O'Hara, 2004) have large budgets and target groups such as novice drinkers, regular underage drinkers and young established drinkers (Academy of Medical Sciences, 2004; Jernigan & O'Hara, 2004). Babor et al. (2003) summarise the impacts in this way:

Exposure to repeated high-level promotion inculcates pro-drinking attitudes and increases the likelihood of heavier drinking... Alcohol advertising predisposes minors to drinking well before legal age of purchase (Babor et al., 2003, p.183)

Contemporary marketing practices are crafted to infiltrate, appropriate and express dominant representations of youth culture and lifestyles. Promotion is never static, even in established markets, as new cohorts of young people become available as targets for marketing activity as they mature (Saffer, 2002). Jackson et al. (2000) describe specific campaigns designed to sell to 'starter' and 'established' drinkers in the age range 14-17 years. The 'marketing mix' uses variations on product, price, promotions and distributions to cater to the characteristics of these two groups. Promotion includes the recommodification of drinks into designer packages to compete in a context of changing

patterns of youth recreational drug use. This involves product taste, naming, graphics and point of sale advertising that play on recognisable features of 'designer drugs', flattened, screw top containers, which are portable and easily concealed, and informal word-of-mouth peer endorsement for 'starter' products as opposed to media advertising, and active youth sales promotions for the 'established' products (Cooke et al., 2002; Jackson et al., 2000).

Further, alcohol marketing has spread into the diverse new media and other promotional opportunities that are increasing favoured by young people. In the USA where youth over-exposure to alcohol marketing is rife, Jernigan and O'Hara (2004) found that less than half of the annual \$4 billion spend on alcohol marketing goes into advertising in print, radio and television media. The rest goes in to a variety of informal activities often related and co-ordinated, that tend to spread and diversify the exposure of young people to alcohol marketing.

ALCOHOL IN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

Like many other countries, Aotearoa New Zealand has enacted changes in policy in the past fifteen years that have increased access (including youth access) to alcohol and exposure to alcohol marketing (Hill & Casswell, 2004). Alcohol brand advertising was introduced into the broadcast media in 1992 and in 1999 the minimum purchase age was lowered from 20 to 18 years. Both the Sale of Liquor Act of 1989 and the 1999 amendment increased access and availability through increased outlet trading hours, lifting controls on outlet density and allowing the sale of beer in supermarkets (Habgood

et al., 2001). National alcohol surveys have shown increased youth consumption with young people drinking more frequently, increasing the quantities they drink on a typical drinking occasion, increasing their number of heavier drinking occasions (Habgood et al., (2001).

This is the environment in which contemporary alcohol marketing and therefore the meaning-making of young people around such practices is set. What follows is an account of our qualitative methodology and analyses of data that provide insights on the impacts of alcohol marketing among young people.

Method

Focus group data from event-related¹ and ongoing affinity-group² sessions with young people in Auckland, New Zealand have been recorded since early 2003. To date these have engaged more than 250 young women and men aged between 14 and 18 years recruited from the community networks of our research team, and include both indigenous Maori³ and settler Pakeha⁴. Open-ended interviews about social life were guided by means of a broad interview guide that included a number of leads toward discussing alcohol marketing. These included questions such as:

- What events have you been to lately?

¹ Data were collected from groups of friends following youth social events such as concerts, parties, school balls etc.

² Affinity groups were constructed of 3-5 friends matched by age, ethnicity and gender, that met three times over the course of the project to provide data on their experiences with alcohol.

³ Maori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁴ Pakeha is a Maori word for non-Maori settler peoples usually of European descent.

- What is cool?
- What are your favourite ads?
- If you were a drink, what would you be?
- What do you do in the weekends?

The schedule was treated as a set of start points for discussion and flexibly applied to meet the specifics and make up of particular groups. This approach successfully generated lively, interactive data sessions of up to three hours duration that often required minimal inputs from the researcher to keep them going. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, checked against the audiotape by the researchers. The resulting data pool has been thematically coded (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 1990) and the coded materials subjected to discursive analyses (McCreanor & Nairn, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell et al., 2001a; Wetherell et al., 2001b) to highlight the action orientation and meaning-making in our participants' accounts of identity and marketing. We have attempted to keep the analyses 'light-handed' as a way of emphasizing the significance and authenticity of the youth voices we have reproduced here. Our energies have been directed much more toward the selection and arrangement of the data than to fine-grained interpretation. We feel this is justified in part because of the inherent dangers of having researchers 'of a certain age' heavily engaged in imputing the meanings generated by young people. More importantly, we wish to emphasise that in many instances the materials we have gathered are in themselves highly analytic and reflexive

to the youth cultural contexts from which they emerge, rendering our interpretations gratuitous and potentially patronizing.

Results and analysis

This process has enabled us to describe a series of themes running through participants' talk on the topic of alcohol marketing. In this paper we describe and explore three themes that relate to young people's engagement, identification and consumption of alcohol marketing, for description and exploration. In presenting the data we have italicized the brand names of alcohol products, provided pseudonyms for all participants and used the initials of interviewers where they appear in the data

Engagement

Our analysis shows a wealth of expressions and exemplars of participants' engagement – the ability to recognize, discuss, debate and elaborate – with meanings around alcohol marketing. Many participants provided comments on specific advertisements and campaigns that demonstrate both awareness of product and a reflexive understanding of the milieu.

Mike: ... if you look at those, those *Tui* ads they're all ... you can all relate them to either something you view in quite high respect or something that appeals to you.

They target you and oh you know, it ends up making good ads, but.

MG: Target you in what way like?

Robert: The *Lion Red* one's aren't, it's like "Cheers *Lion Red*," and there's like this dude in a house with these really timid people and he like throws a party and everyone's getting drunk and it's not; it doesn't portray a good image.

Mike: Oh I don't know; like the red blooded song for *Lion Red*.

Hanna: That's a good song, man I like that one.

Mike: But I do honestly reckon a lot of those beer ads and alcohol ads; cause I mean parties are what we do in our leisure time after work and so that's what appeals to us most through meeting heaps of people and have fun, um experience different things and like and that's what they target (Mixed gender 16/17 years)

This excerpt shows a group of participants comparing the merits of different campaigns. Mike's opening claim is that targeting, by using elements and materials that are valued or interesting to the peer group, makes for quality marketing. The valued elements are crucially things that a wide youth audience can "relate" to; there is a degree of identification implied. Robert challenges this stance with a counter-example of an advertisement that portrays inappropriate alcohol use, but is drowned out by Mike and Hanna's endorsements for the theme song of the disputed ad. Mike is then able to elaborate on his targeting claim by articulating the convergence between the marketing images of alcohol parties and the peer group leisure goals of socializing, fun and novelty. Effectively he is arguing that the manifest success of alcohol marketing arises from the fact that young people can identify with its representations of youth culture. The interplay also demonstrates the utility of marketing and its artifacts to conversation and interchange in the way in which it is naturalized into such interactions.

The next sequence shows a playful, argumentative engagement using the marketing materials of a number of local beer brands that is suggestive of their value to everyday conversation.

Tim: If you buy two *Tui's* you got a prize ... little hats

Pip: *Export* did that for a while...If you brought ten handles of *Export* you got a shirt...If you guessed who scored the first try in a game you got a shirt

Ron: No if you brought a *Steinlager* you got a sticker with a number of someone like thirteen and if number thirteen scored you got a shirt

Pip: that was *Export Gold*

Ron: No I think *Steinlager*, the people who were sponsoring the [national rugby team] All Blacks (Mixed gender, 17 years)

The comfortable collaborative style of these passages suggests that this is familiar territory that may be reiterated from other settings. Participants have taken on board enough of the marketed messages to be able to participate easily in such interchanges. The positive valence of such sponsorship deals is reiterated within the group where prizes and support for the All Blacks are likely to be seen as positive contributions. The multiple ways in which the different campaigns merge and morph in relation to each other suggests an overall effect of congruence rather than dissonance in terms of the ways in which these participants engage with the marketing and with any one of these brands.

At younger ages the knowledge and analyses may not be so clear but the marketing still has social salience. The following excerpts demonstrate the detailed and nuanced ways in which the materials reverberate informally through private conversations.

Vicki: I think I've seen a magazine [advertisement] of *42 Below Vodka* I think it is, and it's always like dressed up in different clothes and things. It's really weird...

Meg: They [the products] were just wearing different clothes because this was like a fashion magazine (females 15years)

These young women build a collaborative account of a particular campaign. Vicki's active puzzling through, perhaps reflecting her inexperience, is answered by Meg with the explanation about the magazine type. The analysis and the marketing images are thus coherently retained rather than marginalized as "weird". The next excerpt provides further evidence of this kind of engagement.

Millie: Oh that's for *Coruba* with the dance classes and stuff ... And how to speak, how to learn Coruban. (female 15 yrs)

It's not clear whether this participant understands the bogus usage of the term Coruban as if it were a Caribbean language, but the notion that the drink stands for the dance and language of another culture has been retained.

The following statement is about a complex television advertisement that depicts two young lads (with a box of beer product) acting up at the local tennis club, which has been distilled into a notion of style.

Micheal: It's like tennis *Lion Red* style...they like serve the ball and smack it over the fence. The old women are like all sensible eh. (Male 14yrs)

The brand is associated with an outrageous, masculine, fun-loving, rule-busting approach to a genteel and privileged sport.

Overall our participants actively engaged with marketing materials and often articulated sophisticated understandings of youth cultures that explained the interweaving of social and symbolic aspects of markets with youth identities. This understanding is inflected to greater and lesser degrees in much of their talk about alcohol marketing, which spans a range from analytic and conversationally narrative, to collaborative interrogation and other forms of 'puzzling' over the marketing materials they spoke of.

Identification

Our participants cast generic consumption as a youth identity marker, a collective, cultural practice in which the symbolic or psychological properties over-ride the material value of what is purchased. They were very aware of the importance and power of consumption in young people's lives, arguing that engagement in buying and possessing provides salient and interesting markers to signal identity, status and belonging.

Fiona: ... teenagers actually latch onto things because they want to be like everyone else, they don't want to stand out, so they conform to like what everybody else is doing and buy the stuff. (17yrs)

Fiona's understanding of youth culture links trends in behaviour to consumption, setting up a logical consequence that social inclusion requires individuals to adapt to such norms. The mildly critical tone of her statement suggests that Fiona's own position is at least ambivalent and in some conflict with her self-perceptions around identity and agency. Whatever the tensions between individual and group needs, there are other drivers also at work; David elaborates on the social and symbolic dimensions of consumption.

David: I think the main thing that makes teenagers our age buy things is what's in trend and what other people are doing. Like especially music I think, you know, I want to buy music that's cool ... like other people buying music and telling you about it. Word of mouth is probably the biggest advertiser. (17yrs)

David's analysis assumes youth engagement in consumer culture. He injects himself strongly into the discourse; to be able to buy "cool" stuff and talk about it is vital to participation in youth identities. The resulting discourses are seen as important features of youth markets and our data are replete with examples of this kind of talk about alcohol brands.

Some participants' analyses engage critically with alcohol marketing, particularly for its symbolic values and adopt various identity positions attached to particular brands.

Mike: ...those ads...you can view yourself as one of those blokes...like those *DB Draught*, I mean *DB Draught* tastes like crap but um the ads are really good you know? The working man, you know the good honest kiwi bloke, the *Speights* ad, you know like, that was a classic ad...and even, yeah a lot of like *Steinlager* ads like yeah they're just really powerful...their message is like, it's not only the beer but like the *Steinlager* man...it's like be the man, you can or something ...and one of them's motto is "know who you are" and they're just really powerful messages. It's really good marketing. (17yrs)

Several important insights are available from this young man's analysis of contemporary beer advertisements on television in this country. Overall he is a discerning consumer of the marketing, freely articulating his views, making distinctions between the pitch and product, and passing judgment on campaigns with accolades like "classic", "really good" and "powerful". The strength and coherence of his analysis suggest that this is a discourse that he has produced before and that it is of value to him in settings beyond the research interview.

Another notable feature of this participant's position is his attentiveness to the identity marketing that runs through the examples he is analyzing. The acknowledgement of self-identification with the iconic representations of local masculinities in the advertisements,

keys the mundane ideologies of national identity current Aotearoa New Zealand. A critical insight is the observation that the company's message is far more than 'drink our beer', it is the vastly more important message "know who you are", strive to "be the man" that you are capable of being. The brand is positioned in a mentoring, almost parental role in the development of Mike's identity and it is this relationship that fuels the warmth of his final statements, which can be read as an appreciation of the sage advice more than an ironic dismissal of the sophistication of the marketing.

A further point is the reflexive, recursive quality of Mike's analyses of the enjoyable fictions created by the marketing. Identity positions are always somehow paler, more ambiguous than the advertisements allow for – the "honest kiwi bloke" is always less desirable as even as an ideological figure (not to mention in the flesh) than marketing television's golden moments might lead us to expect. There is a coarseness, a desperation and even brutality, that Mike airbrushes away in favour of the tempered sagacity, charismatic modesty and wry humour of commodified masculinity which he enshrines as valued social insights.

Further examples show ways in which such identities are relevant to participants experiences in the world beyond the research interview as well.

Helen: ... the *Heineken* ad ... saying like you have to be up in there to drink Heineken you know, if you're not good enough you don't drink it... (17 years)

In this reading of the brand Helen highlights the proscriptions of the brand identity, and implies a quality standard which rhetorically offers the drinker prestige for symbolic display, if they can measure up to these demands. A further text links an advertisement fantasy with the brand.

Tim: with that *Export* ad... they got the bus like I'd love to do that. Just like grab a whole lot of people and go... But you'd need *Export* to do it as well. (*17 years*)

The television commercial in question shows attractive young people abandoning their humdrum existence to join bus road-trip with mix of rebellion, music, spontaneity and alcohol. This scenario clearly works for Tim but the final phrase suggests that the experience is alcohol and brand dependent. A final text illustrates some other interfaces between brand and identity.

Karen: I used to get mocked kind of, like when I drank *KJB* and stuff.

... But that's the only thing I found that I could drink because I never really had a thing for the strong spirits – is that what you call them. Like *Woodstock's* and ...
[unclear] ... because I had really bad experiences.

Karen's experience with "strong spirits" is mapped by brand name and offers insight into both social and personal dimensions. While she acknowledges a brand that she can consume, she explains her aversion to spirits using the phrase "never really had a thing for" which is language that is typically used of relationships with people. Her description

of the social reactions she experienced around the consumption of particular brands, whether she is actively positioning herself by brand or not, is also relational and suggests the kinds of peer-group influences that attach to disapproved human pairings.

Overall, participants demonstrate identification with marketing and brands at both social and personal levels, understand themselves to be targets of campaigns, and value knowledge and scenarios from specific advertisements as accurate representations of youth interests and cultures. Some participants' analyses work critically and reflexively with alcohol marketing in particular highlighting the targeting of young people through a range of approaches and content.

Consuming identities

Our analyses indicate that engagement and identification enable the personification of branded products and the uptake of such alcohol identities. A cluster of these were evoked by the general probe "If you were a drink, what would you be?" We were impressed by the lively, interactive discussions that ensued, which often took the form of a game with sideshows of teasing, joking and competitive exchange.

Caitlin: I would be a *Vodka Cruiser* because

Chrissy: You're cruisy

Caitlin: Because I'd be getting, I'd be drunk by younger people rather than old fogeys.

Mel: Yeah I'd be like an alcopop.

Abby: Vodka because it's like a widely drunk drink.

Emma: *Baileys* I'm sorry because like everyone drinks it and it's really popular and pretty much the same reason as Kate.

MG: Why would you be what you want to be...?

Emma: I don't know. Because it tastes good.

Caitlin: Yeah.

MG: And what was it, what was the one you said sorry?

Abby: *Archers*. It's like schnapps.

Mel: What was the one that Kate thought?

Chrissy: *Passionfruit Vodka Cruiser*, they're nice.

(Females 15 years)

In this segment, the interchange turns into a game of "favourites" in which each person volunteers an often specific branded product into which they interpolate some perceived characteristic (with collaboration) of their own. These characteristics are mostly reflective of socially desirable attributes; "cruisy", popular, good taste, "nice" and associated with youth. The facility with which participants can build these branded identities for

themselves and rationalize them with positive human attributes speaks of the familiarity with the product and the acceptance and success of the marketing.

Jane: I think I would like to be something like *Baileys* or *Kahlua*, it is really nice, it is not really expensive and not really cheap – not that I am for everyone but you know what I mean, you can have it straight or

Tina: Are we talking about you here Jane?

Jane: I mean ...

Tina: On the rocks, on the beach, I would quite like to be a *Heineken*, not to be flash but still taste nice

Mary: I would probably be one of those – what is the premix Vodka drink, *Tattoo*.

(Mixed gender 17 years)

This second excerpt covers similar territory although being a mixed group (though the males are silent in this section) there is an element of teasing evident as well. Jane offers a light sexual innuendo with her identity choice which is picked up by Tina, whose curiously poetic next turn sounds almost like an advertising phrase itself. In both texts, participants take their adopted identities beyond mere naming to elaborate on the significance and implications of the frame. To be able to say “I am not for everyone” is to begin imagining a life rather than simply paralleling characteristics of person and beverage. The alcohol identities on offer from the marketing are consumed symbolically for pleasure and sociability.

Participants demonstrate varied ways in which alcohol identities are taken up and made use of in personal and social settings. These include the playful use of identity positions as well as unwanted attributions by others.

DISCUSSION

Alcohol is prominent among the many branded consumer goods that young people increasingly use as a way of signaling their identity and place in the world. Although the alcohol industry frequently attempts to refute any suggestions that their campaigns reach or even target underage drinkers, our findings are highly congruent with the strong international evidence of over-exposure of young people (Jernigan & O'Hara, 2004) particularly in youth oriented media. It is clearly important for the profitability and expansion of alcohol markets that new generations are constantly primed and recruited into the ranks of consumers (Babor et al., 2003). The familiarity and level of comfort with alcohol brands, evident in our data, demonstrates that the success of these marketing styles is strongly contributing to this goal.

The themes described in the data from young people demonstrate their engagement and identification with, and consumption of alcohol marketing materials in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Our data instantiate the claims of postmodern theorists such as Warde (1994) around symbolic consumption and support Rose's (1996) warnings about the commercialisation of identity. It seems clear that, for our participants, a variety of probably ephemeral, branded identities are now an important part of how they see themselves and others, lending weight to Hall's (1992) claims about the "old identities"

being supplanted by new identities. Contemporary marketing practices are grounded in these social science theories of identity and consumption, bringing a worryingly inventive robustness to the goal of commodifying identities as natural, positive and unproblematic markers of who we are.

The commercialisation of identity alone raises the question of how we feel as a society about the role of marketing in shaping identities. However, added to this are concerns over the nature of these commodities and the role that marketing practices play in linking identity to consumption. The appropriation of forms iconic to Aotearoa New Zealand such as the All Blacks and our ironic “yeah right”, and the creation and determination of identities and positionings such as the “cruisy” vodka, the “*Steinlager* man”, the “*coruban*”, and the “*Lion Red* style”, are critical influences on our identity options. Such representations of identity are packaged for youth consumption through their targeted exposure within youth cultures and are taken up, re-produced, modified and recycled by young people. Marketing keys into these usages and continually re-appropriates ‘cool’ to reflect positively in its goals of sales and profits.

As a socially embedded and strongly addictive substance, alcohol is no ordinary commodity (Babor et al., 2003), and our concern, supported by the data, is that the evident proliferation of the marketing of alcohol identities has been highly successful. We would argue that the complexity and power of the developments we have discussed represent a growing threat particularly to the wellbeing of our young people, and pose a profound challenge to existing regulatory frameworks and public health strategies.

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