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### The use of Facebook to promote drinking among young consumers

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## **The use of Facebook to promote alcohol brands to young consumers**

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## **The use of Facebook to promote alcohol brands to young consumers**

### **Abstract**

This study explores the use of Facebook to promote alcohol brands to young adults. This research is important given the scant advertising regulation on social media until March 2011 in the UK, and due to the limited research on Facebook as a communication medium to promote brands. Two qualitative studies are used, including focus groups with a sample of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, and a netnographic study investigating alcohol brands, alcohol groups, and nightclubs on Facebook. Findings indicate that firms use Facebook as a communication tool to promote alcohol brands through context association, sales promotions, participation, and co-creation. Media convergence theory supports a discussion around such promotional activities, which can reach any English-speaking, young consumer using social networking sites such as Facebook. Summary statement of contribution: this research is the first to use netnography combined with focus groups to explore how alcohol brands promote drinking on Facebook. This study focuses on an original topic that has brand communications as well as advertising policy implications; it is relevant due to the lack of research looking at social media as a promotional platform, and also due to the scant research informing advertising regulation on social networking sites.

### **Keywords**

Alcohol brands; Facebook; Focus Groups; Netnography; Social Networking Sites

## **The use of Facebook to promote alcohol brands to young consumers**

### **1. Introduction**

This study explores the use of Facebook to promote alcohol brands to young adults. This topic raised our interest due to the lack of advertising regulation on social media until March 2011 in the UK, due to the limited research on Facebook as a communication medium to promote brands, and due to the recent data on alcohol consumption. The British Medical Association argues that the consumption of alcohol represents a significant cause of medical, psychological and social harm (Hastings & Angus, 2009). Britain is among the heaviest alcohol consuming countries in Europe (NHS, 2008), with 24% of adults (33% men and 16% women) being classified as hazardous drinkers in 2007 (NHS, 2011). The UK government's recommendation regarding alcohol drinking is that men and women should not drink more than 3-4 and 2-3 units<sup>1</sup> per day, respectively, on a regular basis (NHS, 2011). However, recent statistics show that 26% of men and 18% of women drink more than 21 and 18 units, correspondingly, in an average week (NHS, 2011).

Misuse of alcohol can lead to mortality as a result of alcohol-related diseases such as liver cirrhosis or stroke, and data shows an increase of 20% in alcohol-related mortality from 2001 to 2009 in the UK (NHS, 2011). In 2006-2007 the economic cost of alcohol to the NHS in England was about £2.7 billion (NHS, 2009), while the overall cost of alcohol

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<sup>1</sup> A unit of alcohol is 8mg (or 10ml) of pure alcohol.

to society (including the justice system, education, social services, employers, and human costs) is estimated at £55.1 billion (Lister, 2007).

Young adults' excessive consumption of alcohol and the development of 'binge drinking cultures' are particularly problematic, given the negative implications that such behaviours can have for individual drinkers, national health systems, health insurers, and society as a whole. Binge drinking is especially prevalent among young people globally, and a common phenomenon in the UK (Banister & Piacentini, 2006; Piacentini & Banister 2009). Szmigin et al. (2007, p. 360) define binge drinking as 'a high alcohol intake in a single drinking session,' and highlight that this social practice raises much concern due to how young individuals behave in public when intoxicated (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009).

A number of factors determine alcohol drinking among young adults, including internal determinants such as social and mood enhancement motives, conformity motives, and coping motives driven by stress and tension (Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Rutger, 2005; LaBrie, Hummer, & Pedersen, 2007). Previous research also identifies external reasons for alcohol consumption, including situational context (e.g., celebrations, general events), sales promotions, and alcohol advertising (Szmigin et al., 2007; Gunter, Hansen, & Touri, 2009; Hastings et al., 2010). In the following sections the extant literature is reviewed, focusing particularly on the external determinants of alcohol drinking such as media advertising.

## **2. Determinants of alcohol consumption among young adults**

Early research identified four reasons that explain why young people drink alcohol, including avoidance, socialisation, sensation-seeking, and enjoyment (McCarty & Kaye, 1984). Later research highlights that social and enhancement motives explain young people's situational alcohol consumption (Kuntsche et al., 2005). Kuntsche et al. (2005) suggest that young people drink moderately when socialising with friends (social motives), and heavily for enhancement reasons (e.g., mood-enhancement). Szmigin et al. (2007) and Griffin et al. (2009) report similar findings, indicating that heavy drinking is mostly associated with the 'goal' of getting drunk as opposed to socialising with friends. As put by Fry (2010, p. 1281), 'for young adults, socialisation and drinking have become intertwined to such an extent that drinking is viewed as an end in itself.'

Concurrently, external factors influencing alcohol consumption include low prices, promotions, and advertising (Agostinelli & Grube, 2001; Gunter et al., 2009; Hingson, Heeren, Winter, & Wechsler, 2005; Kuo, Wechsler, Greenberg, & Lee, 2003; Szmigin et al., 2007). In the UK, alcohol brands spend £800 million per year to promote alcoholic beverages (Triggle, 2009). Further, Szmigin et al. (2007, p. 361) suggest that alcohol brands compete in order to 'be the essential accompaniment to young people's social life,' while Gordon, Hastings, and Moodie (2010; Gordon, Moodie, Eadie, & Hastings, 2010) argue that there is strong evidence to suggest that alcohol marketing impacts young adults' consumption of alcohol. In fact, previous research shows that frequent promotions and low prices are linked to higher rates of binge drinking among university students

(Hingson et al., 2005; Kuo et al., 2003), and this highlights the need for research on the marketing communication practices of alcohol brands.

Studies focusing on traditional media have examined associations between media exposure, and young adults' alcohol use (Atkin, 1990; Aitken, 1989; Fox, Krugman, Fletcher, & Fischer, 1998; Gunter et al., 2009; Pasch, Komro, Perry, Hearst, & Farbakhsh, 2007; Russell, Russell, & Grube, 2009; Snyder, Milici, Slater, Sun, & Strizhakova, 2006). Alcohol advertising is particularly appealing to young adults, and can influence initial development of drinking behaviour; researchers suggest that media depicting or advocating alcohol use may encourage drinking among young viewers (Goldberg, Niedermeier, Bechtel, & Gorn, 2006; Robinson, Chen, & Killen, 1998). Further, Anderson, de Bruijn, Angus, Gordon and Hastings (2009) conclude that exposure to alcohol advertising and promotions increase the likelihood that young adults will start to use alcohol, or increase their consumption if they already drink alcohol. Researchers also found that young people's exposure to TV advertising for specific types of alcoholic beverages predicts consumption of those drinks (Gunter et al., 2009). Similarly, other researchers found that young people between the ages of 15 and 26 who are more exposed to alcohol advertising tend to drink more than those who are less exposed to alcohol-related advertising (Snyder et al., 2006). Indeed, receptiveness to positive alcohol messages increases if such messages are communicated during the target audiences' favourite TV programmes or shows (Russell et al., 2009).



Further, Gordon and Hastings et al. (2010; Gordon, Moodie et al., 2010) found that young people are aware of, and involved with, alcohol marketing in several media including the Internet. The authors suggest that marketing content created by alcohol brands appeals to young adults, and exposure to such content influences their alcohol brand attitudes. With regard to the Internet, Hastings et al. (2010) argue that new media such as social networking sites, viral marketing, emails, and mobile marketing (e.g., texts) are growing media channels for alcohol advertising. This is because digital media (e.g., the internet, social media) are less regulated than traditional media (e.g., TV, radio, print); they are interactive and allow for creativity, which engages audiences with the brand, and advertising content (Hastings et al., 2010; Schultz, 2000). Indeed, researchers have found that young people who display alcohol use and intoxication on Facebook are more likely to score high on problem-drinking, and to report drinking-related injuries (Moreno, Christakis, Egan, Brockman, and Becker, 2011). Also, a recent advertising deal between Facebook and Diageo has given rise to extended debates and concerns about the increased exposure of young adults to online alcohol advertising (Boseley, 2011).

A report by the House of Commons' health select committee (House of Commons, 2009) identifies digital media as an area in which alcohol companies have focused their marketing practices, and recommends that alcohol promotion be banned on social networking sites. Therefore, it is important to understand how alcohol companies are communicating with young adults on social media. Media convergence theory (Jenkins, 2004; 2006) can be used to explain how alcohol brands use marketing content to

transcend multiple media channels (including social networking sites) to communicate with young people, and how young people engage with such media content.

### **3. Media convergence theory**

Jenkins (2004, p. 37) postulates that media convergence ‘is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments.’ Consumers, on the other hand, are using these different media technologies to gain some control over the flow of media, and to engage with other users (Jenkins, 2004). Thus, media convergence refers to a process that changes how media companies and advertisers operate, and how consumers process media content (Jenkins, 2006) including news, entertainment and marketing communications.

In particular, the author suggests that convergence represents a corporate as well as a consumer opportunity, which re-shapes and re-configures media power, aesthetics, and economics (e.g., digital media), and poses new challenges to marketers (Jenkins, 2004). Further, convergence theory suggests that consumers are now more actively involved with specific media (e.g., social media), and search for media content across different media platforms (Jenkins, 2004). The theory also suggests that convergence fosters a participatory culture by enabling consumers to create, store, and re-circulate content (Jenkins, 2001), and this changes the way in which consumers use media (Jenkins, 2004). Participatory culture contributes to a media environment where media consumption also

involves the production of media through participation, co-creation, and collaboration with companies (Deuze, 2007). The degree of participation, collaboration, and co-creation of content depends on the extent to which the company is willing to share its means of operation with its audiences (Deuze, 2007). In this way, media consumption (or co-production) has become a collective intelligence process, which depends on our ability to 'pool our resources and combine our skills' to create 'an alternative source of media power' and content (Jenkins, 2006, p. 4).

In the case of social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), companies share their content with consumers, and allow them to participate in their sites (e.g., through pages or groups) by posting comments, and sharing their brand experiences with other consumers as well as the company. Young adults are engaging with alcohol brand pages and groups on social networking sites in such a way, and this may be problematic. Social networking sites are now the 4th most popular online activity ahead of personal email, accounting for 10% of all Internet time (Nielsen Online, 2009). Yet, research that examines how companies are using social networking sites such as Facebook to communicate with young adults and promote their brands is non-existent. Indeed, a multitude of brands, including alcohol brands (e.g., Bacardi, Absolute Vodka), maintain Facebook pages to co-produce media content with their audiences, which include young adults.

#### **4. Purpose of the study**

This study aims to explore how companies use Facebook to promote alcohol brands to young adults aged between 18 and 24. The use of social networking sites has become a

popular activity among young people, and over 24% of Facebook users are aged 18 to 24 ([www.checkfacebook.com/](http://www.checkfacebook.com/)). Specifically, the research objectives are:

- To explore what topics, if any, alcohol brands associate with alcohol consumption, and how this is done.
- To explore how alcohol brands attempt to engage young people in alcohol-related content co-creation through Facebook discussions, if at all.
- To examine young adults' perceptions of how such promotional activities may influence their attitudes toward alcohol and alcohol brands.

This research focuses on an original topic that has marketing communication policy implications, and uses qualitative research in the form of focus groups and netnography to achieve the aim and objectives highlighted above. The following sections discuss the methodological approach and findings of the research.

## **5. Methodology and methods**

A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study due to the exploratory nature of its aim and objectives (Creswell, 2007; Carson, Gilmore, & Gronhaug 2001; Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Lass & Hart, 2004). Focus groups were initially conducted, followed by a netnographic study (Kozinets, 2002).

### *5.1 Stage 1: focus groups*

With a view to explore a direction for, and complement, the netnographic study described below, three offline focus groups (table 1) were conducted with young Facebook users,

aged between 18 and 24, living in the UK. Focus groups' participants were recruited through an online call announced via a web portal, and participation incentives (i.e., book vouchers) were offered to encourage attendance. Fifteen participants attended their respective group sessions. They received an information sheet containing details about the study, and were asked to fill in consent forms outlining confidentiality and anonymity clauses as required by our institution's ethics committee. The group discussions followed a discussion guide, and covered topics such as usage of social networking sites, familiarity with alcohol brand pages and groups on Facebook, alcohol attitudes, purchase and consumption, and perceived influence of alcohol promotions.

Table 1: Focus groups - participants' profiles

	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>Income/Year</b>
<b>FG 1</b>	Martha	Female	22	Postgraduate	Part-time	Up to 5K
	Robert	Male	21	Undergraduate	Part-time	6-10k
	Sophie	Female	21	Undergraduate	Part-time	Up to 5K
	Danielle	Female	22	Postgraduate	Self-employed	Up to 5K
	Kate	Female	19	Undergraduate	Unemployed	N/A
	Karen	Female	23	Postgraduate	Self-employed	6-10K
<b>FG 2</b>	Molly	Female	20	Undergraduate	Part-time	6-10k
	Ted	Male	20	Undergraduate	Part-time	Up to 5K
	Ivan	Male	22	Postgraduate	Self-employed	Up to 5K
	Leah	Female	21	Undergraduate	Undisclosed	Undisclosed
<b>FG 3</b>	Norah	Female	22	Undergraduate	Undisclosed	Undisclosed
	Linda	Female	23	Postgraduate	Undisclosed	Undisclosed
	Claudia	Female	20	Undergraduate	Undisclosed	Undisclosed
	Agatha	Female	19	Undergraduate	Undisclosed	Undisclosed
	Irene	Female	20	Undergraduate	Student loan	Up to 5K

### 5.2 Stage 2: netnography

Netnography can be seen as a type of online ethnography that entails the use of ethnographic research methods 'to study the cultures and communities that are emerging

through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets, 2002, p. 62; Kozinets, 2006). It encompasses the naturalistic observation of online textual discourse to gain understanding of the symbolic meanings, attitudes, and consumption patterns of online groups (Kozinets, 2002; 2006; 2009; Jayanti, 2010; Hamilton & Hewer, 2010). As such, it is a useful methodology to examine both how alcohol brands promote themselves through social networking sites, and how such promotions may engage young adults in co-creating Facebook content with brands. The netnographic study reported here took place on Facebook between March and June 2011.

We rigorously followed Kozinets' (2002) guidelines for designing and conducting the netnographic study. The author prescribes five steps for netnographic research (Kozinets, 2009). Firstly, the cultural entrée stage involved familiarising ourselves with the characteristics of relevant alcohol-related groups and alcohol brand pages in order to screen the most appropriate for this study. The sampling criteria we used included the groups and pages' relevance to the research topic, the number of members, the level of traffic, the number of posts, the interactions between members, and the relevance of interactions given the research aim and objectives, and richness of the data (Kozinets, 2009). The second stage involved collecting and analysing data concurrently. Twelve alcohol-related Facebook groups, brand pages, and nightclub pages were purposefully shortlisted, and observed based on the aforementioned criteria (table 2). Facebook downloads and field notes generated over 63,000 words of textual data, after a preliminary screening to exclude irrelevant information.

Table 2: Sampled Facebook groups' and pages' characteristics

Pseudonym	Type	Target market	Facebook category	No. of members/fans	Promotion references (yes/ no)
Vodka	Spirits Brand Group	International	Common interest – Food & Drink	42,067	No
Lager1	Beer Brand Group	International	Common interest – Food & Drink	10,700	No
Consuming Alcohol	Generic Group	International	Common interest - philosophy	2,379	No
Alcohol Rules	Generic Group	UK	Business - Marketing & Advertising	1,127	No
Whiskey	Spirits Brand page	International	Business Company	516,738	Yes
Alcopop	Spirits Brand page	UK; Youth	Brand product	103,274	Yes
Lager2	Beer Brand page	UK	Business Company	18,728	Yes
Lager3 for England	Beer Brand page	UK	Business Company	16,422	Yes
Club1	Club page	UK; students	Club	4,472	Yes
Vodka-Energy	Club page	UK; students	Entertainment & Arts – Nightlife	1,084	Yes
Club2	Club group	UK; students	Business Company	2,362	Yes
Club3	Club group	UK	Entertainment & Arts – Nightlife	1,962	Yes

These Facebook pages and groups were generally characterised as public pages with more than 1,000 members or fans. The selected pages and groups had a high number of posts, and inter-member or inter-fan exchanges, but these were usually higher on brand pages than groups. Also, alcohol brand pages and clubs pages offering sales promotions specifically targeted at young, British, midlands-based consumers were selected. This decision was due to the information provided by our focus groups' participants regarding such brands and clubs, but also due to those brands' positions in Millward Brown's BrandZ 2010 top brands annual report. In addition, despite the high number of alcohol-

related generic groups identified (2,517), only two were observed, i.e., one global ('Consuming Alcohol') and one British ('Alcohol Rules'), due to their fit with the sampling criteria. Further, a British club page ('Club1'), an events page ('Vodka-Energy'), and two club groups ('Club2' and 'Club3') were observed based on the same sampling criteria, and due to the information provided by focus groups' participants. Finally, many attempts were made to conduct interviews on Facebook. However, none of such attempts yielded relevant data.

## **6. Data analysis and research ethics**

Data analysis entailed combining the offline and online data without losing sight of the contexts investigated in this research (Kozinets, 2010). Although netnography suggests a grounded theory approach for data analysis (Kozinets, 2009), we chose to adopt the principles of template analysis in this study, following a review of the extant literature, which provided insights and relevant theory (e.g., Hingson et al., 2005; Jenkins, 2004; 2006; Kuntsche et al., 2005; Kuo et al., 2003; Szmigin et al., 2007). Template analysis permits the consideration of theoretical concepts from the start of the research, and accepts the adaptation, rearrangement, and addition of themes as they emerge through the analytical process (King, 1998). Template analysis allows researchers to thematically analyse any type of textual data; it requires the preparation of a 'coding template' containing key codes, which are deemed relevant by the researcher, and organised in a logical manner (King & Horrocks, 2010; King, 1998). The initial template had *a priori codes*, which were determined prior to the start of the analysis and based on the literature reviewed above. As the analysis progressed, codes were added and rearranged around



emerging themes grounded on participants' views, and experiences. In this third stage of the research process, there was an emphasis on trustworthy interpretation (Kozinets, 2009) through the analysis of textual communications by brands and young adults that related to alcohol consumption. In this way, the unit of analysis is not the individual brand manager or consumer as such, but the communicative acts performed by such agents (Kozinets, 2009). Furthermore, the analytical process and data interpretation were discussed between all of the researchers involved in this project, who ensured interpretive quality by respecting the worldview of participants, providing evidence to support the emerging interpretations, and considering the contributions to the extant theory (Pratt, 2009).

Other steps included the conduct of ethical research, and opportunities for participant feedback (Kozinets, 2009). This project underwent a complete ethical committee review. Given that netnography is a new methodology, there are ethical issues that are difficult to address, namely consent, and the issue of what is public or private in cyberspace (Kozinets, 2002). Nevertheless, the researchers fully disclosed their presence on Facebook, as well as their roles, affiliations, and intentions to the sampled Facebook groups and pages, and observation permission was sought throughout the research process. Data has been kept confidential and anonymous through the use of pseudonyms, and due to ethical committee recommendations, direct quotes from Facebook posts were deliberately eschewed to avoid direct traceability of data. Also, all discourses (i.e., postings) from users outside the 18-24 age range were excluded from data analysis and interpretation. In this way, we complied with Facebook requirements regarding research

conduct, and a first draft of the data analysis was emailed to participants to provide them with opportunities for feedback. The findings are discussed below.

## **7. Findings**

This section explores the findings and key insights derived from both qualitative studies in relation to the contexts that alcohol brands and nightclubs associate with alcohol consumption, how alcohol brands engage young consumers in alcohol-related Facebook discussions and content co-creation, and young adults' perceptions of how such promotional activities may influence their own attitudes toward alcohol and alcohol brands.

### *7.1. Promoting alcohol through context association and good deals*

As highlighted in previous research (Szmigin et al., 2007; Gunter et al., 2009), young adults associate alcohol consumption and specific drinks to particular socialisation contexts and situations and this was made clear by focus groups' participants:

*'I like white wine, but that's mostly for when I meet friends at home. The times we drink most are when we go out with the basketball team. The sports nights socials are crazy, I can't keep up with it.'* [Karen, FG1]

*'Tomorrow we have a big event, a national [sports] competition. We're sponsored by a bar in Digbeth, so in the evening we'll go back to them, have a*

*load of food and discounted drinks. And the team'll go out to a nightclub.' [Ted, FG2]*

Additionally, the data from the netnographic study showed that alcohol brands make use of such contextual and situational associations to reinforce their positioning in the minds of young consumers via Facebook. Themes used by alcohol brands on Facebook included the weather, places, varied types of music and music venues, moods, eating, celebrations and parties. For instance, 'Alcopop' taps into its 'sweet and summer' taste, while 'Lager2' draws on the lager-music and lager-sports association to post messages and create promotions on Facebook. Observed examples of Lager2's promotions include a competition to win CDs, and another to win tickets for sports matches (table 3).

Table 3: Alcohol promotion on Facebook

Promotion type	Facebook Pages/ Groups with promotions (pseudonyms)	Facebook Section with Promotional Information				Overall description
		Information section	Wall section	Events section	Discussion section	
Competitions and prize draws	Lager2; Alcopop; Lager3; Club1; Club3; Vodka-Energy	Lager2	Alcopop; Lager2; Lager3; Club1; Club3; Vodka-Energy	Lager2; Lager3	Alcopop	Prizes include holidays/ trips, shopping vouchers, tickets for sports matches, music albums, drink supplies, t-shirts, glassware, headphones, film tickets, VIP party tickets (drinks included), festival tickets. Participants have to perform all sorts of tasks including dancing, taking quizzes, participating in games, writing slogans, voting or signing in to a particular group. Lager2 organises many competitions.
Free entry; free gifts	Club2; Alcopop; Club1; Club3	Club2; Club3	Alcopop; Club1; Club2; Club3			Free t-shirts (Alcopop offer seems fake); Free entry in clubs, by asking to be in the guest list or in exchange of appearing at the door in a particular manner; free shuttles to clubs
Cheap drinks; price	Club2*; Vodka-Energy*;	Club2*; Vodka-	Alcopop; Club1;	Lager3		Clubs often offer 2-for-1 drinks, free drinks through vouchers or

cut-offs; 2 for 1; free drinks (*targeted at students)	Alcopop; Club1;; Lager3	Energy*	Club2			happy hours, or have special nights with very cheap drinks (e.g., 80p in Club1). Some of these are specifically targeted at students. An example is 'The Vodka Project*', which takes place every Wednesday in Leeds, with £1.50 drinks. Also, there are club ticket offers and the same mojito voucher offer in several club pages.
Membership benefits	Vodka-Energy	Vodka-Energy				Benefits were not specified.
Tasting experiences	Whiskey				Whiskey	Not targeted at young consumers.
Auctions	Vodka		Vodka			Links to eBay auctions of vodka bottles.

Indeed, Facebook is the perfect medium to help alcohol brands create such contextual and situational associations in the minds of young adults, as young consumers make extensive use of Facebook through various platforms (e.g., mobiles, laptops, desktop), to keep in touch with friends, and to organise their social lives. According to focus groups' participants, one of the most relevant Facebook features is the events application, where they get to organise, communicate about, and invite people (or be invited) for parties, and other social events. Focus groups' participants also demonstrated unaided recall of alcohol promotions on Facebook, and their linkages with local events:

*'I only [remember] FJ cider... I noticed it as a direct [Facebook] advert. It was just an image, but it's something I'm aware of through other advertising sources, too. They sponsor a TV programme called Celebrity Juice that I'm very fond of... I think it's quite funny that's linked together. Also, there are certain pages for nights out. Here, on a Thursday night in Club1, you have Vodka-Energy... I think that's quite a big advertising ploy that works really well.'* [Ted, FG2]

*'There's that [vodka brand] nightlife exchange project that comes up [on Facebook]. I probably joined it, I don't know. It talks about the [vodka brand] events in your area, and if you vote for your city you can get it to come to you. What's the prize? They let you go to it. They only let a certain amount of people in. You can't go unless they invite you to. They let you, and your friend, go. Not sure how it works. Apart from that, clubs just tend to advertise a certain brand that's cheap, like Lager3.'* [Irene, FG3]

Another aspect of Facebook as a promotional vehicle is that young adults often use it to get free gifts and offers, which require little effort if compared to competitions. Also, young adults are concerned with their 'online image,' and what is deemed acceptable by their peers (i.e., social norms) regarding alcohol consumption:

*'They have deals and this way they get to promote the event, and if more people come to the event they increase sales. So, I think this is their strategy anyway. Who's going to 'like' a bottle on Facebook? You're going to follow a series of events that happen every week. It just looks dodgy, 'Sophie likes Whiskey'! Whereas if you like a night... Yeah, it's ok, she likes to go out; she doesn't like drinking per se.'* [Sophie, FG1]

Indeed, the quote above highlights how clubs use social norms to encourage alcohol consumption. However, the quote also shows that, despite the netnographic evidence of how and what types of promotions alcohol brands use on Facebook (table 3), it is mostly

nightclubs' promotions, rather than those of alcohol brands, that seem most salient to our focus groups' participants. In fact, clubs directly capitalise on young adults' interest in low alcohol prices and good deals, such as free entry, and free or cheap drinks:

*'I don't remember any ads from the brands themselves. But I've got invites to events... Not sure whether they're sponsored by alcohol brands or the club nights are promoting certain brands. So, I've got an event coming up on the page, it'll say cheap drinks or something like that, and it's in the title as well... Yes, there are Vodka-Energy nights as well, that's the main thing I've seen.'* [Leah, FG2]

*'You get extra promotions if you join their Facebook group. Clubs say, 'if you text this number then you get free tickets or a free taxi'. So it's a special additional incentive to join the group... I only really see drinks offers when I get a message about events. That's when I see promotions about drinks.'* [Claudia, FG3]

Further, the netnographic study reveals that clubs' group administrators encourage content generation through postings, and are well attuned to the potential of Facebook to foster increased alcohol consumption discussion among young clubbers. Generally, there is some level of scepticism, among young adults, regarding the quality of the alcoholic drinks on offer, which is often voiced on clubs' Facebook 'walls'. However, this only serves to generate even more discussion and more postings on clubs' pages, as well as reassuring replies from page administrators.

Such promotions are, of course, far from innovative if we consider the types of promotional tools used by alcohol brands generally, outside Facebook. However, they show that clubs as well as brands are actively using Facebook to further engage with their target audiences, by fostering a dialogical relationship with their consumers. Additionally, online identities are problematic, and no one can be sure of the ages of the people who choose to take part in such competitions. This means that there is the potential for young people, including underage consumers, to be exposed to such promotions via social media such as Facebook (see table 4 below).

Table 4: Communication of legal drinking age

<b>Page/Group Pseudonym</b>	<b>Was Drinking Age Displayed?</b>
Vodka	No
Lager1	No
Consuming Alcohol	No
Alcohol Rules	No
Whiskey	Yes
Alcopop	No
Lager2	Yes
Lager3 for England	Yes
Club1	Yes (when asked by FB users)
Vodka-Energy	Yes
Club2	No
Club3	No

Finally, although a whiskey brand page ('Whiskey') was observed, it was not actively using promotions on Facebook. The only promotional activity on Whiskey's page related to tasting events, and such postings were uploaded by users, not the page administrator. This can be said to reflect the positioning of such a brand; given that Whiskey targets older consumers, it would be unlikely that promotional activities such as freebies and competitions would appeal to their target market. Young people may well consume whiskey, but they are not Whiskey's primary target market.

### *7.2 Engaging young adults in alcohol-related content co-creation on Facebook*

Alcohol brands and clubs engage with young adults through sales promotions activities (table 3 above), and content co-creation between young adults, brands and clubs takes place through Facebook walls as well as via information sections, events sections, and discussion sections on Facebook (Jenkins, 2006). Netnographic evidence suggests that competitions attract a higher number of Facebook users than freebies, and that this is expressed by young adults either through 'liking' promotional posts or by commenting on walls and discussion spaces related to a particular promotion that they liked. Thus, sales promotion efforts are successful not only in terms of getting young consumers to participate and engage with the brand, but also regarding the amount of online content that such promotional activities generate on clubs and specific alcohol brands' Facebook pages.

Also, discourses from the focus groups indicate that such discussions seem to reflect what we have termed young adults' 'lucky winner's hope.' Young adults are interested in



taking part in alcohol-related promotional activities either for the sake of feeling the joy of winning, to win a particular prize, or because they enjoy the tasks involved in the competitions (e.g., quizzes). Discourses indicate that they even enter competitions using their friends' names if they do not live in the UK, for example, to increase their chances of winning, or simply to help their friends:

*'I even enter competitions for my friends. My boyfriend is a music producer, and I entered a sound engineering thing for stuff for him.'* [Sophie, FG1]

*'I enter competitions on alcohol websites... Not sure how I find them. I've definitely entered lots of competitions, like, Lager2 have lots for gigs and I do that a lot.'* [Molly, FG2]

We found that alcohol brand and club page administrators encourage competition-related posts, as they increase traffic and word-of-mouth on their Facebook pages. However, what is interesting is that winners' feedback is possible via Facebook; by listing winners and their experiences of winning on Facebook, alcohol brands and clubs foster that 'lucky winners' hope' among young adults in a way that is not possible through other, traditional media. This also contributes to providing alcohol brands or club pages with a sense of authenticity, as Facebook promotions without information on previous winners do not seem genuine. For instance, 'Alcopop' had not announced previous prizes, which makes its competitions look dubious. Good examples can be found on Lager2's Facebook page, where some consumers go to the extent of trying to manipulate competition 'judges'

(i.e., users of the page, who ‘judge’ competition entries), in order to foster favourable attitudes among those who have deciding votes on the winning entries of a particular competition. However, this may also be an indication of some form of alcohol-related, sales promotions ‘proneness’ (Alford & Biswas, 2002), that is, the willingness of some young consumers to actively search for alcohol-related promotions as suggested by the focus group participants:

*‘I like to search for the promotions that send you free offers and stuff. If you tag yourself to them, you get free entry to the clubs. I like stuff like that, free deals, etc.’ [Karen, FG1]*

Further, the positive experiences related to one’s ability to get good deals via Facebook are further enhanced by Facebook’s capacity to offer opportunities for direct participation and co-creation (Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2007) between clubs, alcohol brands, and the young adults who hope to win.

### *7.3 Perceived influence of Facebook promotions on young adults’ attitudes toward alcohol brands*

Although the alcohol groups observed in our netnographic study had many members, such members mostly used the groups as a means to express their online identities. In fact, alcohol groups were used as a type of ‘positive attitudinal statement’ rather than as a platform for interaction and co-creation, which may well be linked to problematic alcohol consumption (Moreno et al., 2011).

Clubs' and alcohol brands' pages, on the other hand, were much more participatory, and such interactions took place around promotions and directly between consumers, alcohol brands and/or clubs. This is also reflected above (in section 7.2.), for example, where active club and alcohol brand page administrators interact with consumers' posts, answer their questions, clarify promotions, reassure them about the possibilities of winning competitions, and so on. Page administrators allow and indeed encourage young adults to express their positive attitudes and seek for promotions on Facebook. One Facebook participant, for example, tried to get sponsorship from 'Lager3' in exchange for tattooing their logo on his skin, and another attempted to organise a tasting event through Whiskey's brand page. These are clear indications of consumer-led co-creation, which are encouraged by alcohol brands and clubs, and are reflective of positive attitudes toward specific alcohol brands.

Facebook administrators also try to engage users in ways that do not overtly entail alcohol-related promotional actions, as a means to get young adults involved with their brand's or club's Facebook pages. For example, Vodka-Energy sends emails to users through the events section of Facebook in order to advertise their parties. This, in turn, indirectly promotes their site and alcohol deals. Also, by tapping into drinking contexts and situations, alcohol brand pages upload numerous posts such as quizzes, which ask questions related to sports, relevant events, music, and so on. Users, sometimes more than 50 at a time, respond to such questions promptly, and enthusiastically. This helps alcohol brands and clubs to co-create page content with young Facebook users (Jenkins, 2006); it

also fosters word-of-mouth and positive attitudinal statements toward alcohol consumption and alcohol brands, given that relevant promotions are advertised concurrently, and indirectly, through such interactions.

Additionally, focus groups' participants perceived that such promotional activities influence their behaviour as alcohol consumers:

*'Do you think that these types of promotions affect what you buy?' [Interviewer]*

*'Yeah, I think so. You know what you like to drink. All the alcohol adverts on television are all about lifestyle, whereas when you're young you've got your lifestyle and it's more about saving money than anything else.'* [Danielle, FG1]

*'Yeah, if [Vodka] is £3.00 and lemon VK is £1, I'll go for the VK.'* [Agatha, FG3]

Although most focus group 1 participants argued that they would go to a night out or social event if it was something that they wanted to do anyway, regardless of whether or not the night was linked to a promotion identified via Facebook, participants of the second focus group suggested that Facebook promotions really do influence their attitudes and where they go:

*'On Mondays or Thursdays sometimes we have promotions, cheap drinks; that'll determine whether I go or not. Basically it's about the price of booze.'* [Ivan, FG2]

Also, Facebook offers the possibility of ‘many-to-many’ interactions (Christodoulides & Jevons, 2011; Christodoulides, 2009), so interaction is essential; young adults are very critical of the amount of emails and spam emails they receive through Facebook groups, and clubs as well as alcohol brands are aware of this issue. Young adults are also very sceptical of the adverts placed on the sidebars of Facebook, which use behavioural targeting to reach consumers:

*‘I never click on the side ads cos’ they have Adware or tracking cookies’ [Kate, FG1]*

*‘Sometimes they have applications, I don’t like that. I get off. I don’t want them having all my information.’ [Molly, FG2]*

Nevertheless, despite their negative views on sponsored Facebook ads, young adults ‘spill over’ their positive attitudes toward alcohol brands, and their promotions, to other young consumers by expressing their enthusiasm for alcohol brands, and by co-creating content through alcohol-related promotions on Facebook. They also perceive to be influenced by such alcohol-related, Facebook promotions.

## **8. Discussion and Implications**

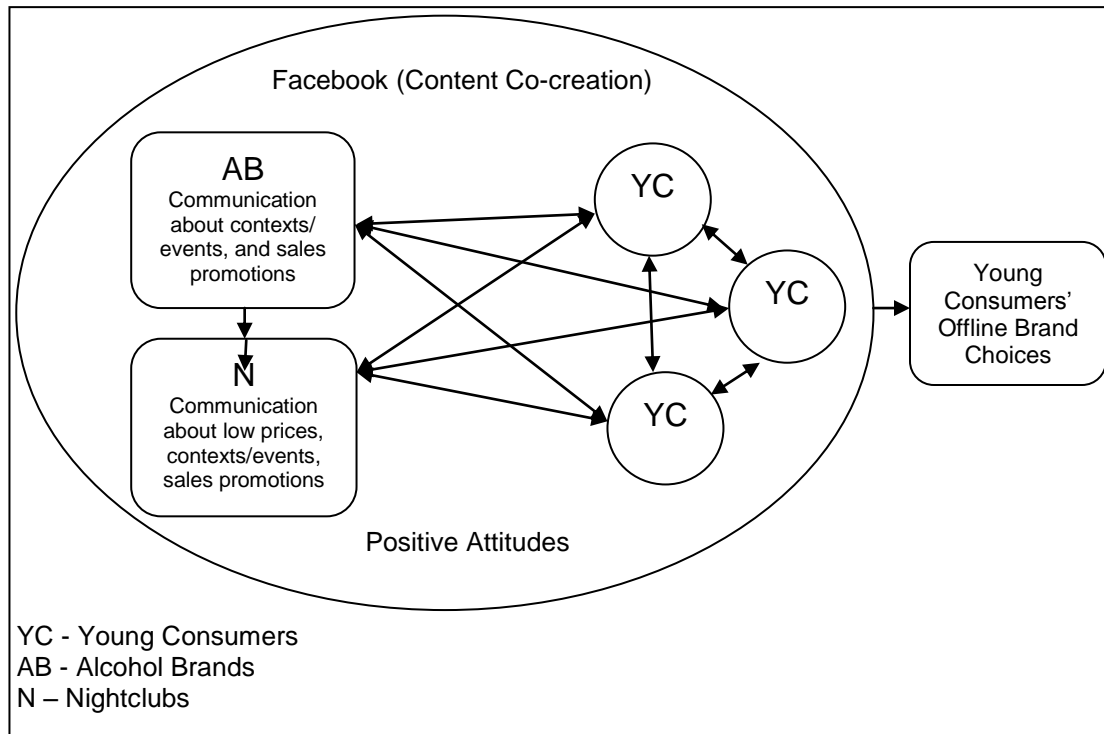
This study suggests that Facebook is widely used as a platform for promotional activities by major alcohol brands, and our sampled young adults perceive to be influenced by such

promotional activities. Our qualitative data supports previous studies that highlight the external determinants of alcohol consumption among young adults (McCarty & Kaye, 1984; Kuntsche et al., 2005; Szmigin et al., 2007), and shows that alcohol brands and nightclubs are indeed using the social motives and socialisation contexts of young people to connect with them through Facebook promotions. That a culture of intoxication exists among young adults is not new; our data shows evidence of such discourses among focus groups participants, and such social norms have been discussed in previous studies (Fry, 2010; Griffin et al., 2009; Szmigin et al., 2007; Szmigin et al., 2011).

In line with previous research (Agostinelli & Grube, 2001; Gordon, Hastings et al., 2010; Gordon, Moodie, et al., 2010; Gunter et al., 2009; Hingson et al., 2005; Kuo et al., 2003; Szmigin et al., 2007), this study clearly demonstrates that low prices and sales promotions offered by alcohol brands on Facebook impact young adults' consumption of alcohol, as well as their choices of alcohol brands. Thus, Facebook has proven an effective medium through which to disseminate such promotions. Indeed, as seen above, such marketing activities can even influence young people's choices of nightclubs and events. However, what is interesting in the present study is the evidence that Facebook enables extended media exposure (Atkin, 1990; Aitken, 1989; Fox et al., 1998; Gunter et al., 2009; Pasch et al., 2007; Russell et al., 2009; Snyder et al., 2006) of young adults to alcohol brands' promotional content, which becomes even more engaging than offline content due to Facebook's participatory and co-creative nature.

Also relevant is the evidence that nightclubs, not just alcohol brands, are playing a significant role in fostering such exposure to alcohol brands' promotions among young Facebook users. Key findings can be illustrated as outlined in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Co-creation of sales promotions communications on Facebook



### 8.1. Advertising policy implications

Alcohol company Diageo has sent nearly a thousand of its marketers to Facebook 'boot camps' to optimise their social media capabilities, which has led to significant increases in their ROI (Boseley, 2011). This means that, unless advertising regulators and public policy makers are able to input the same amount of expertise and resources into regulating such marketing communication efforts appropriately, the harms caused by alcohol brands' promotions targeted at young adults on social media such as Facebook

are very likely to be significant. Although the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK have recently expanded their remit to online media such as social networking sites (Plunkett, 2010), digital media are still only mildly regulated if compared to traditional media. Therefore, there is a need to rethink the appropriateness of alcohol brands' and nightclubs' use of sales promotions on social media (House of Commons, 2009), given the influence such communication activities can have on young adults' attitudes toward alcohol brands and drinking.

If advertising regulators and governments are to take on the challenge of managing the effects of alcohol brands' promotions on Facebook without a ban, we suggest that media convergence theory (Jenkins, 2004; 2006) can be a useful framework to adopt. It can help regulators to conceptualise responsible alcohol advertising in more participatory and integrated ways (Hawkins, Bulmer, & Eagle, 2011), and in a manner that can cater for the flow of 'responsible drinking' marketing communications content across multiple media platforms, including social networking sites.

Further, although underage consumers have not been the focus of this study, it is important to consider the implications that the findings above might have in relation to the exposure of children and teenage consumers to such promotional activities. Online identities are impossible to ascertain and thirteen year-olds, or any child pretending to be thirteen, can join Facebook. Also, any Facebook user can view alcohol brand pages and alcohol groups, which in turn do not always state the legal drinking age on their walls or information sections. This posits a huge challenge to advertising policy makers and



alcohol marketers, given that media depicting or advocating alcohol use encourages drinking among young viewers (Anderson, et al., 2009; Gunter et al. 2009; Goldberg et al., 2006; Robinson et al., 1998; Snyder et al., 2006). Additionally, and building on Gordon and Hastings et al.'s (2010; Gordon, Moodie, et al., 2010) work, young consumers' receptiveness to alcohol brands' messages are high while on Facebook, given that people are more receptive to promotional messages if they are communicated during their favourite mediated programme (Russell et al., 2009) – or, in Facebook's case, their favourite social networking site and/or page.

One solution to this issue would be for Facebook to 'rate' pages and groups according to age appropriateness, and automatically restrict access to adult content, such as alcohol communications, based on consumers' ages as stated on their Facebook profiles. This could be done in partnership with alcohol companies, who would benefit from taking a responsible approach to social media communications in order to protect their reputations in markets where social media regulation is scant.

## **9. Conclusion**

In this study we explore how companies use Facebook to promote alcohol brands and alcohol consumption to young adults. This study focuses on an original topic that has brand communications as well as advertising policy implications; it is relevant due to the lack of research looking at social media as a promotional platform, and also due to the scant research informing advertising regulation on social networking sites. Our literature review addresses the key determinants of alcohol consumption among young adults, and

focuses particularly on external factors such as the impact of advertising, media exposure, and promotions. Additionally, we draw on convergence theory (Jenkins, 2006) to explore how alcohol brands utilise marketing content that transcends multiple media platforms to communicate with young adults, as well as to examine how young people engage with, and perceive to be influenced by, such media content.

Through the use of qualitative approaches such as netnography (Kozinets, 2009) and focus groups (Carson et al., 2001), we present the contexts that alcohol brands and nightclubs associate with drinking, the manner in which alcohol brands engage young consumers in alcohol-related Facebook discussions and content co-creation, and young adults' perceptions of how such promotional activities may influence their own attitudes toward alcohol and alcohol brands, which in turn raise several regulatory questions. Findings suggest that alcohol brands and nightclubs use Facebook to promote themselves through contextual association and good deals, to engage young adults through alcohol-related content co-creation, and to involve young adults through their hope to win sales promotions' prizes and competitions. Findings also suggest that young adults' perceive their attitudes toward alcohol and alcohol brands to be influenced by such Facebook promotions, which highlights the perceived effect that such sales promotions can have on young adults. We suggest that advertising regulators and policy makers could try and age-rate Facebook pages, as well as draw on convergence theory thinking in order to devise further regulation and more effective interventions for responsible alcohol promotion and consumption on social networking sites.

This is a qualitative study, which presents intrinsic limitations with regards generalisation. However, it provides numerous insights into how alcohol brands and clubs are taking advantage of the loose regulations around social networking sites to market potentially harmful products, such as alcohol, to young adults. Our plans for future research include a quantitative study to further explore young consumers' attitudes toward alcohol-related sales promotions on Facebook.

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