

EDITORIAL

Alcohol advertisement prohibition: making it work in Ethiopia

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Alcohol consumption is associated with communicable and non-communicable diseases. The World Health Organization estimates that there are 3 million deaths globally every year in connection with alcohol consumption, and 13.5% of deaths among the 20-39 years age group are related to harmful alcohol use (1). In addition, alcohol use poses a major economic burden and decreases the quality of life of consumers and society at large (2). A systematic review of the economic impact of alcohol consumption from 12 high-income countries shows that alcohol is estimated to cost between 0.45-5.44% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in direct and indirect costs, which is a substantial amount (3). Despite the costly effects of alcohol consumption, alcohol advertisements are commonly seen in the media worldwide, including in Ethiopia.

Over the past few years, the number of local and foreign alcohol companies has increased in Ethiopia. In order to improve their sales, such companies employ marketing strategies – from branding to advertising. Alcohol companies in Ethiopia use broadcast media, such as television and radio, to promote their products (4). Such advertisements require payment for airtime. The companies have the financial capacity to pay for airtime, and incorporate ‘impactful messaging’ that can influence individuals and the community to become loyal customers (4).

The alcohol companies pay experts to help with the basic steps of behavior change communication, backed up by highly experienced and trained marketing professionals. It keeps pushing on the attributes of communication, such as commanding attention, communicating benefits, repeating messaging using multiple strategies, referring to what people are thinking and interested in, building trust, using incentives and rewards such as free drinks, and competition prizes, and influencing its new and loyal customers on what to do next (5).

In terms of behavior change, targeting the younger generation to adopt life-long healthy or maladaptive behaviors such as irresponsible alcohol consumption is much easier than targeting their older counterparts (6). In view of this, creating a ‘positive image’ of alcohol products among the young generation can be considered as

a long-term investment and cultivation on the part of the alcohol industry. In addition, the industry may use misleading messages (4) to promote its products, which is unethical.

To prevent the promotion of alcohol, especially its harmful use among the younger generation, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia House of People’s Representatives has ratified the Food and Medicine Administration Proclamation (Proclamation No. 1112/2019), which restricts smoking in public places and bans all alcohol advertisements on broadcast media (7). Ratification of the bill is an important milestone to for the public health professionals to celebrate. While this should not be considered an end in itself, evidence shows that bans on alcohol advertising have an effect on drinking behavior, especially among the younger generation (8).

It is worth noting that the alcohol industry presents counter-arguments in relation to alcohol advertising bans, including that: a) it is unnecessary to have policies that ban alcohol advertisements; b) there is insufficient evidence that advertising bans reduce alcohol consumption; c) bans may have negative consequences, as people may be tempted to try forbidden issues such as illicit drugs; d) the state may face legal barriers to implementing bans; e) the industry is socially responsible for reducing harmful drinking (9). All these counter-arguments presented by the alcohol industry are widely criticized as strategies to delay the implementation of policies that ban alcohol advertising (9). Although such counter-arguments are weak and not based on empirical evidence, addressing and debating such concerns from the alcohol industry may be helpful to reach consensus on the implementation of the bill and minimize counterproductive strategies from the alcohol industry. In the Ethiopian context, although the level of consultations with diverse stakeholders at different levels is unclear, it is important to hold consultations to ensure implementation of the bill with minimal disruption as possible.

Translating the bill requires establishing follow-up and monitoring systems. Without close follow-up, efforts to enact the bill will remain mere paper work, which is what happened in relation to the Advertisement Proclamation (Proclamation

No.759/2012) (10). Had that Proclamation been implemented properly, the public would have been protected from misleading statements from the alcohol industry (4).

It is relevant to assume inevitable counter action by the alcohol industry to shift its promotional strategies. A study from the UK has shown that an alcohol promotion ban did not bring reductions in the volume of alcohol purchases. However, this may be due to the industry reducing prices to sustain sales (11). Furthermore, the alcohol industry should be socially responsible in protecting the younger generation from early engagement in alcohol consumption. The ministry of Trade that gives licenses to the alcohol industry should be cautious about brands, logos and

trademarks, since these are meant to convey misleading messages. Available evidence attests to the use of brands that are associated, for example, with national and cultural heritage or historical places is being used as a marketing strategy since they are familiar and can be mentioned frequently in media and among the public.

Finally, the public health system, educational institutions, the legal system and those working with and for youth have an important role to play to make the bill effective by developing strategies to inform, empower and prevent the harmful effects of alcohol. Researchers are also expected to develop tools to continuously measure the impact of the bill.

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