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Compliance with age limits for the sales of alcoholic beverages in Romania.

Designing and evaluating a three year campaign

Joris J. VAN HOOFF¹, Lian M. J. REIJLINK², Wim E. VAN DALEN³

Abstract

The availability of alcohol in general is the most important predictor of alcohol consumption and alcohol abuse in adolescents. Alcohol availability can be divided into economic (alcohol prices and discounts), physical (number of alcohol outlets, opening hours), legal (age limits on drinking and purchasing alcohol) and social availability (at home availability, parental behavior and parenting style). When protecting youth from alcohol use, the legal availability is the strongest instrument. Of course, when legislation states that alcohol is not allowed to be sold to people under a certain age, both on-premise (e.g., bars) and off-premise (e.g., supermarkets) alcohol outlet personnel should be trained and enforced in complying with legal age limits.

In order to explore baseline compliance to this legislation a mystery shopping study was conducted in a Romanian city. Under ages and trained students tried to buy alcohol in to explore to what extent alcohol sellers comply with this legal age limits. This compliance level turned out to be 0%.

Within the alcohol project, therefore, it was decided to develop a campaign in which the importance of this age limit was communicated. After this campaign, again compliance was measured. Compliance was improved in the on-premise (bars) outlets only.

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Despite that the results on compliance with the age limit in practice were not strong directly after the campaign, both elements from that intervention and the research method can be used in other Romanian cities to improve and measure compliance with age limits on the sales of alcohol.

Keywords: alcohol; age limits; intervention; campaign; compliance; adolescents; mystery shopping; Romania.

Introduction

The risks of alcohol use for young people are widely acknowledged, however underage alcohol consumption occurs on a large scale. Alcohol is the most prevalent substance used among early and late adolescent (Hibell, Guttormsson, Ahlström, Balakireva, Bjarnason, Kokkevi, and Kraus, 2009). No less than 81.8% of the Romanian youth aged between 15 and 24 have consumed alcohol at least once in their life (Romanian Anti Drug Agency, 2005). Harmful drinking is the third largest risk factor of ill health in the Europe (Anderson & Baumberg, 2006). Anderson and Baumberg (2006) indicate that young people shoulder a disproportionate amount of this burden; 10% of youth female mortality and around 25% of youth male mortality in Europe is due to alcohol.

Young people are relatively vulnerable to the effects of alcohol consumption. The young body and brain is developing which makes it extra sensitive to the toxic effects of alcohol (White, 2006; World Health Organization, 2001). Alcohol consumption at young age can lead to permanent damage to brain functions and structure. This can lead to learning, concentration and memory problems (Tapert, Caldwell, & Burke, 2004; White & Swartzwelder, 2005).

It must be clear what causes alcohol consumption and alcohol related problems among youth in order to prevent it. The system approach considers alcohol problems to derive from the interaction of the overall alcohol consumption and the demand and supply of alcohol. Alcohol related problems of individuals should therefore be seen in the context of the environment in which an individual lives. Many factors are present there to influence the behavior of the individual (Holder, 1998). The extent in which alcohol is available in the environment is a strong predictor of alcohol use (Babor, Caetano, Casswell, Edwards, Giesbrecht, Graham, Grube, Hill, and Holder, 2010). Four types of availability are differentiated to predict the use of alcohol; economic, physical, legal and social availability (Van Hoof, 2010). The most influential factors are the price of alcohol (economic availability), the number and the opening hours of alcohol outlets (stores and bars/restaurants/discos) (physical availability), the existing alcohol legislation and the compliance and enforcement to these regulations (legal availability), social norms and attitudes towards alcohol and alcohol visibility which are in-

fluenced by alcohol marketing, and the presence of alcohol within the social network (social availability) (Chaloupka and Wechsler, 1996; Gruenewald, Ponicki, and Holder, 1993; Wagenaar and Toomey, 2002; Wechsler, Kuo, Lee, and Dowdall, 2000). Especially Romanian communities should be aware of alcohol marketing. Romania is an example of a country where new open market systems permit global alcohol companies opportunities to utilise modern marketing campaigns to introduce new alcohol products and drinking styles (Babor, Caetano, Casswell, Edwards, Giesbrecht, Graham, Grube, Hill, and Holder, 2010).

To prevent alcohol related harm it is important to get more insight in the availability of alcohol for adolescents and consequently take measures to reduce the availability of alcohol for adolescents. The DRAIN (Dutch Romanian Alcohol policy Implementation Network) project addresses this matter. In line with the system approach, the DRAIN project strives to reduce the availability of alcohol for under aged youth and to change the permissive attitude towards youth drinking. Pitesti, a Romanian city with almost 200.000 inhabitants, functioned as a pilot city for the DRAIN project. The three-year project (April 2008- April 2011) derived from cooperation between Romanian and Dutch professionals and was financed by the MATRA program of the Dutch ministry of external affairs. Within this pilot, an evidence based preventive approach was implemented to construct a general model for alcohol community prevention.

Several interventions and research studies have taken place in Pitesti. This article reports on a design of a campaign aimed at improving compliance with age limits, and two research studies regarding the legal availability of alcohol for youth in Pitesti. The legal availability of alcohol for adolescents in Romania is restricted by the national legislation on alcohol. The legal age limit in Romania is 18 years of age, which means that sellers may not sell alcohol to youngsters under the age of 18 in Romania. The legal availability can be increased however by bad compliance to this law. In October 2008, when the DRAIN project started, a mystery shop study was conducted in Pitesti to measure the compliance of sellers to the age limit law. A second research study took place in November 2010, the same amount and sort of alcohol outlets were visited again to see if the compliance by sellers to the age limit law increased. In the meantime several interventions have taken place in order to create awareness for the consequences of teenage drinking and a start has been made to reduce the availability of alcohol for youngsters in Pitesti.

Campaign design

The DRAIN project started in April 2008 and during 3 years effort has been made to reduce the availability of alcohol for adolescents. During the first few years of the DRAIN project interventions mostly consisted out of creating public support for the problem and the project; an educational campaign for parents and

children and media coverage on the issue. Concrete interventions on regulations and enforcement that were scheduled in the project plan were more difficult and took more time to organize. These interventions took mainly place during the final months of the project. The most important interventions and activities concerning regulations and enforcement were;

The approval of a new local law which forbids the sale of alcohol within 200 meters from schools during school hours, in May 2010. Two meetings for sellers in Pitesti (shop owners, who sell alcohol off-premise and bar and restaurant owners, who sell alcohol on-premise) to inform them about the new legislation and about compliance to alcohol legislation in general. These meetings took place in May 2010 and February 2011. About 15 sellers participated in these meetings. Several meetings for police people (from different police forces) to inform them about the effective enforcement of alcohol legislation and the installment of a police control team. These meeting took place in May 2010 till December 2010. The development and introduction in the shops of stickers which display the legal age limit on alcohol sales and the new local law. This was executed in September 2010 till December 2010. A brochure and flyer were developed about alcohol legislation in order to inform the police. The development started in September 2010 and in December 2010 the police forces received the materials. A training visit about police enforcement to the Netherlands; from Pitesti two representatives from the local government and three policemen representing each a different police force took part in November 2010.

Method

In this chapter we describe the mystery shopping study as a method to measure compliance in off-premise (supermarkets) and on-premise (bars and restaurants) alcohol outlets. Also attention is being paid to ethical considerations, research procedure, recruitment of the mystery shoppers, and the research protocol. The Romanian law forbids the sale of alcohol to customers under the age of 18 years old (Law no. 61 from 1991, modified and republished on M.O. 387/18.08.2000), and in Pitesti an intervention campaign was designed and executed as described in the previous chapter.

In order to measure compliance with this law two mystery shopping studies were executed (2008 and 2010). Within each mystery shopping study four 17 year-old students were trained, and committed a total of 58 alcohol purchase attempts (25 supermarkets by a girl, 25 supermarkets by a boy and 8 bars by a boy and a girl). In order to measure the ‘normal’ situation, the sales persons (the person to which the purchase attempt of the minor was addressed) do not know this research study is conducted. This type of observational research is called ‘mystery shopping’.

Research design

As described before, this article reports on two mystery study studies. The first study was executed in 2008 at the relative beginning of the DRAIN project. At that time, no attention was given to compliance on the age limits for alcohol sales yet. The second round of mystery shopping was executed in 2010 after the interventions described in the previous chapter were implemented aimed at reducing the availability of alcohol for youngsters in general and some specific activities to improve compliance with age limits and responsible alcohol serving in bars. Both rounds, the same number of outlets were visited (50 supermarkets, or alimentare, and 8 bars). Of course, in both studies the research protocol was exactly the same, and in both years the same number of 17 year-old mystery shoppers participated (two boys and two girls).

Mystery shopping

Of course, this type of research involves ethical issues. The sales personnel are not aware of the study which is executed. The relevant question is: "*Can one include sales personnel in a study without their prior consent?*" In the scientific and marketing literature to judge the appropriateness of undercover research approaches, four important criteria are mentioned (Denzin & Erikson, 1982; Hodges, 1988; Cassell, 1980; Dench et al., 2004; Gosselt et al., 2007): (1) societal relevance of the study; (2) inadequacy of conventional research methods; (3) public nature of the objects (persons) observed; (4) avoidance of negative consequences for those research objects.

We think that it is appropriate to executed mystery shopping research since: (1) underage drinking is an important health problem in Romania; (2) the contradictory self-reports of store managers and adolescents underline the inadequacy of conventional research methods; (3) the interactions between customers and store personnel in supermarkets and bars are public; (4) mystery shoppers behave like normal customers and do not demand too much time of the store personnel. Also we will keep the names of the visited stores and bars and their personnel anonymous, and also the names of the mystery shoppers will be kept anonymously.

Regarding the under aged mystery shoppers executing the visits, also two ethical considerations are relevant, since we do not want to encourage them to use alcohol nor do we want them to be confronted with awkward situations, vendor aggression, or police interrogations during the store visits. Therefore the mystery shoppers were all personally briefed about the health risks of alcohol use. During the research they were carrying an official letter stating the research objectives and always, the researcher was close by (but out of sight of the sales personnel) to intervene should any trouble arise (which did not happen in all 116 mystery shopping visits).

Recruitment of the mystery shoppers

Both years we asked two schools to recruit the four mystery shoppers (two boys and two girls each year). Both years, also approval of the School Inspection (Inspectoratul școlar), and parental consent was asked. The schools were asked to select ‘typical’ 17 year old students for the study that are able to fulfill the duties of a mystery shopper. Teachers are in daily contact with teenagers in this age group and are therefore able to select teenagers that look like typical 17 year old youth. This prevents the selection of mystery shoppers that look older or younger than their true age, or that are very deviant in their choice of clothing or hairdo. For their participation in the study the mystery shoppers receive a diploma for voluntary participation. Also, travel and diner costs are covered.

Supermarket and bar selection

The 50 supermarkets and 8 bars visited were selected using a “neighbourhood strategy”. All shops were located in the six neighbourhoods surrounding the city centre and the city centre itself. Within these neighbourhoods the mystery shoppers *at randomly* select supermarkets to execute a purchase attempt. No attention was paid to expected success rate, type of shop et cetera. Almost all sales points can be visited (if open), as long as they are safe for teenagers and if a teenager does not stand out too much.

Mystery shopping protocols

Within the supermarkets and bars the mystery shoppers used a protocol which was practiced before (the day before, or the morning of the research). Each year the study took two days. On the first day around 25 supermarkets were visited during the day (50% by a boy and 50% by a girl), and in the early evening 4 bars were visited (by two mystery shoppers, a boy and a girl). The next day this schedule was repeated with another mystery shopping team, also consisting of a boy and a girl. Visiting a supermarket took about five minutes, visiting a bar about 20 minutes.

In the supermarkets and bars a strict protocol is followed, the basic guidelines are: a mystery shopper acts like a “normal customer” and enters the shop (alone). The mystery shopper takes a can of alcohol containing beer out of the shelves and goes to the counter to pay. When actually encountering the vendor, the mystery shopper greets them (with “Hello”, in Romanian language). If the mystery shopper is asked whether the alcohol is for personal use, (s)he answers affirmatively (with “Yes”). If the mystery shoppers is asked about his/her age, (s)he answers falsely “18 years old” (in line with what most ‘normal under aged customers’ would do). If (s)he is asked for an identification document, (s)he would show their real

identification document (which says that the mystery shopper is too young). If the store personnel refuse to sell alcohol, the mystery shopper does not insist and leaves the store. If the store personnel sell the alcohol item, the mystery shopper buys the can of beer and leaves the shop.

In bars the same guidelines are followed, only the mystery shoppers go in together (one boy and one girl), and order drinks the “normal way” in that specific location. When asked for age, they lie and state that they both are 18, when asked for identification document; they show their real identification document.

After the purchase attempt a checklist is filled out, containing questions regarding the day and time of the visit, the seller (gender, age) and the circumstances at the point of sale.

Results

Both years (2008 and 2010), in Pitesti 58 alcohol sales points were visited. This involves 50 supermarkets and 8 bars. In 2008, all 58 purchase attempts were successful and therefore compliance with the Romanian law stating that no alcohol can be sold to youth under the age of 18 is 0% (Van Hoof, Moll, and Constantinescu, 2009). In 2010 in the supermarkets again all purchase attempts were successful, but in the 8 bars, 3 times the mystery shoppers were refused to buy alcohol (also see Table 1).

Table 1: *Number of purchase attempts and compliance*

	Purchase attempts 2008	Compliance 2008		Purchase attempts 2010	Compliance 2010	
		N	%		N	%
Supermarkets	50	0	0%	50	0	0%
Bars	8	0	0%	8	3	37.5%
Total	58	0	0%	58	3	5.2%

When investigating the 3 times the 17-year-old students were refused to buy alcohol, two different reasons appear to occur. One time, the vendor did not sell alcohol because she estimated that the mystery shoppers were too young (what was true). However, she did not ask for ID, she simply did not sell. Two times another reason occurred; it was too early in the day to sell alcohol. Two times a vendor told the mystery shoppers that no alcohol was sold before 7 p.m. So, the reason not to sell is not directly caused by the age of the mystery shoppers, but it is evident that some regulation is followed.

Discussion

From the first mystery shop study (2008) it becomes clear that sellers in Pitesti do not bother the age limit legislation (Van Hoof, Moll, and Constantinescu, 2009). Proper enforcement of this regulation probably also fails since the compliance in supermarkets is 0%. This convincing data shows that improvement of compliance and enforcement is needed to reduce the availability of alcohol for minors.

The second mystery shop study took place at the end of the project period (November 2010). By repeating the first mystery shop study, an indication of the effect of the interventions that have taken place during the project years can be given. From the results of the second study can be concluded that the compliance to age limits hasn't improved significantly *yet*. Only one of the purchase attempts was refused because of age, two other attempts were refused for another reason. We can therefore not say that the compliance to age limits has improved within the short time frame between the intervention campaign and the mystery shopping study. There can be said however that some regulations are followed regarding the sales of alcohol.

An explanation for the results that failed to materialize could be that the interventions concerning regulations and enforcement almost all took place not long before the second study. Awareness among sellers and the police started to become visible only a few months before the second study. Strong enforcement by the police was not even realised yet. Concrete behavioural change in compliance of sellers can not be expected immediately. To measure the possible effects of the interventions a third mystery shop study should be conducted out some time after the enforcement was intensified.

Also, the local organizations need to maintain public awareness of the existence and importance of age limit legislation. Media are an important source achieving this. Another instrument which could be used is this type of mystery shopping research. From an experiment in the Netherlands we have learned that compliances on shop floor level increases when shop owners know that research is conducted and how they performed on this matter. If the results of mystery shopping purchase attempts are communicated, compliance increases (Van Hoof, Gosselt, Baas, and De Jong, 2012).

Not all shop and bar owners attended the meetings for sales personnel. This was the first intervention campaign on age limits in Romania and lessons can be learned. It seems that more effort should be made to sales personnel in the first place. The topic of sales to under aged people is rather new in Romania, and all changes take time to incorporate. Within a next campaign, for instance, researchers and campaign executers might visit the shops and (i) explain the legislation, (ii) inform sales personnel about the harmful consequences of selling alcohol to

people under aged, (iii) inform sales personnel about the financial consequences and increased enforcement by the police, and (iv) explanations about mystery shopping studies.

A manual for local alcohol policy in Romania is developed from the experiences of three years of DRAIN project. Romanian communities can use this manual in order to implement a local alcohol policy themselves. This manual can be found on the DRAIN webpage: www.drain-project.eu

Conclusions

This study shows that compliance with the legal age limit on alcohol sales in Romania is still an issue of major concern. Although, by running this campaign alcohol sales personnel has been slightly influenced, alcohol is still easily available for underaged customers and potential consumers.

Age limit legislation is an important instrument because it only affects young potential alcohol consumers. For instance, by increasing alcohol prices, alcohol consumption will decrease in the complete population. This also affects adult consumers, to which alcohol consumption is harmful as well, but who are legally allowed to buy and consume alcohol. The same rationale involves physical availability. When the number of alcohol outlets decreases, or opening hours are limited, consumption will decrease, but adults are also affected. If the government should do this, another negative side effect might occur; home distilled alcohol production and consumption might increase, which is not preferable since this results in bad quality alcohol and an increase of alcohol victims.

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