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## **Alcohol between the Covers: The Portrayal of Alcohol in Online Versions of Magazines Read by Young Women**

C.Archer. *Curtin University*. [Catherine.archer@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Catherine.archer@cbs.curtin.edu.au)  
\* Robyn Ouschan. *Curtin University*. [Robyn.ouschan@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:Robyn.ouschan@cbs.curtin.edu.au)

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### **Abstract**

Health authorities advise that teenagers should have no alcohol due to its dangerous effects (Hickie and Whitwell 2009). Despite this, alcohol is a dominant part of Australian culture and teenage girls are increasingly drinking at high risk levels and placing themselves at risk of long-term harm (Chikritzhs 2004). While many studies have investigated the link between alcohol advertising and teenage drinking, few studies have looked outside of advertising, particularly at editorial. A content analysis was conducted looking at alcohol related content in non-advertising material in the online versions of four Australian magazines directed at young women. Mention of alcohol was found in all four magazines with three magazines linking alcohol to celebrities and others with source credibility.

### **Introduction**

This study focuses on content analysis of alcohol related promotion in the editorial of online magazines read by girls and young women aged 13 to 20. The reasons behind this approach are due to the rising negative impact of alcohol abuse on teen girls, the high impact of media on young people and the gap in the research of content analysis of editorial (related to alcohol) aimed specifically at young women. Scientists recommend that alcohol should not be consumed by teenagers under 18 and consumption should be delayed as long as possible in the late teenage and early adult years (Hickie and Whitwell 2009). Despite this strong evidence, alcohol is still a dominant part of Australian culture and has been so for more than 200 years (Winstanley et al 2011). Teenagers in Australia and across the Western world consume alcohol, with young people frequently drinking to excess, increasing their susceptibility to harm (Jernigan 2001).

At the same time, health professionals have recognised that the media is “the most potent influence on normal child and adolescent development in modern society” (Strasburger 2004, p. 54). Teenagers grow up in a world saturated with the mass media and media shapes children’s behaviours (see Brown and Witherspoon 2002). There has been extensive research into the amount of alcohol advertising directed at young people and the power of alcohol advertising to influence young people’s alcohol consumption (for example, Austin, Chen & Grube 2006; Snyder et al 2006; Collins et al 2007; King III et al 2009). In Australia, Jones and Gregory (2007) found that young people believed alcohol advertisements promoted a link between drinking and social benefits or having a good time. Strong evidence has also been found in alcohol advertisements of elements (setting, humour, music/jingle actors and story) linked to liking of advertisements by young people (Ouschan, Fielder & Donovan 2010). Other research has looked at TV and music video exposure (eg van den Bulk and Beullens 2005), films and TV drama (Thompson and Yokota 200; Russel, Russell and Grube 2007; Russell and Russell 2007), popular music (Primack et al 2008) and sports sponsorship (Phillipson and Jones 2007; Jones, Phillipson and Lynch 2006).

However, a thorough review of the relevant literature shows the majority of analysis focuses on alcohol *advertising* and its effects on young people, not non-advertising content, or what is known in the trade as the editorial section of media. One reason for this apparent neglect by researchers may be that writers and photographers – the editorial team of media outlets – may be seen by some to be beyond the marketers' control. However, professionals working in media relations are working every day to influence the influencers. Traditionally, alcohol in Australia has been promoted through advertising on TV, radio and in print and through point of sale marketing. In 2011 alcohol marketing strategies are becoming increasingly more complex and innovative, involving campaigns that combine a range of technologies (Alcohol Policy Coalition 2011). While advertising has specific codes regarding alcohol designed to protect children and adolescents, this is not true of editorial content in magazines, the internet and broadcasts (Donovan et al 2009; Alcohol Policy Coalition 2011).

The motivation for study of editorial content related to alcohol promotion as opposed to advertising is driven by theories which assert that media consumers place more value and are more likely to be influenced by the editorial content of media than advertisements. For example, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) suggests that those exposed to editorial, rather than advertising, may engage in deeper processing (elaboration) (Petty & Cacioppo 1986; 1996). Source credibility is also seen as an important component when studying editorial, as messages will be more believable to the audience if the source *and* the medium have credibility (Wilcox and Cameron 2006; Schiffman, Bednall, Watson & Kanuk 1997). Although teens may be more skeptical than children, they are notoriously susceptible to peer pressure and the media – and role models depicted within the media – may function as a kind of “super peer” for them (Strasburger 2004).

This study focuses on media aimed at girls from the age of 13 to 20. More than 80 per cent of alcohol consumed by teenagers is done so at high risk levels for acute harm and one in five teenagers drink on a weekly basis (Chikritzhs 2004). Teenage girls are increasingly drinking at high risk levels and placing themselves at risk of long-term harm (Chikritzhs 2004). To date, the research into the impact of the media on girls has predominantly focused on sexuality (eg Durham 1998), stereotyping (eg Peirce 1993) and body image (eg Guillen and Barr 1994). Australian boys and girls consume media differently (ACMA 2008). Half of teen girls' time is spent with digital media. However, the most popular form of recreation when alone and not using digital media is still reading. Despite teen girls being voracious offline magazine readers, they are also turning to the internet as the second most popular use of their discretionary time spent using digital media after television (ACMA 2008). Boys are more inclined to play video games as a second option after TV. The internet content of teen magazines reflects the content of the print versions, with more scope online for feedback and interaction from readers. While teen girls consume a variety of media, they are the largest of consumers of magazines in Australia (Devereux 2009), with 90 per cent reading magazines. Young women's magazines are a trusted form of media for young women (Durham 1998).

## **Methodology**

This exploratory research is a content analysis looking at alcohol-related content in non-advertising material in the online versions of magazines directed at young women aged 13-20. As discussed in the literature review, content analysis has been used in other studies related to alcohol including music videos, television shows, magazine and television advertising. The most recent content analysis study was of alcohol in cartoons within a daily newspaper

(Donovan et al 2009). However, it appears that no study has been conducted looking at the editorial in online magazines aimed at younger men or women. Given the rise in alcohol abuse by younger females and the known influence of the media on adolescents, the following research questions have influenced this research:

*Are there stories and photographs related to alcohol in online versions of Australian magazines read by teenage girls, to be known as online versions of teen girl magazines (OVTGMs)? Is there evidence of promotion of alcohol in OVTGMs?*

*Are credible sources (for teenagers) linked to alcohol in OVTGMs?*

*Is there any evidence of promotion of health messages related to alcohol in OVTGMs?*

In Australia, Dolly (readership 360,000) and Girlfriend (readership 349,000) are the top-selling teen girl magazines (Devereaux 2009). Cleo (readership 401,000) and Cosmopolitan (readership 548,000) also have a large proportion of teenage readers, despite promoting their core target as women 18-34. These four titles represent the major magazines read by younger women.

The researcher visited the online versions of these four magazines and used the “search” facility for each magazine website. This research was conducted in May 2011 where a “snapshot” of the searches was recorded by the researcher by copying screen grabs of each search, including photographs, for analysis. In turn, each magazine website was searched for the terms “alcohol”, “wine”, “beer” and “vodka”. These terms were chosen as beer and wine dominate sales in Australia with women generally preferring wine (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The search term “spirits”, the third popular drink, did not yield usable results. The white spirit, vodka, has risen as a popular drink choice, particularly among young women (Budden 2008). Results were then analysed, including the headlines and content, and whether alcohol was portrayed in a positive or cautionary light. Searches generally yielded results back to 2008 though some articles were not dated.

## Results

Of the four OVTGMs, Dolly and Girlfriend (whose target is younger readers) had less mentions of alcohol, wine, beer and vodka than did Cleo and Cosmopolitan, whose core target is purportedly female readers over 18. In Dolly, 72 per cent of mentions were related to celebrities’ abuse of alcohol. In Girlfriend, 42 per cent of mentions were linked to advice or discussion on the topic of alcohol use and abuse. Cleo contained 50 per cent mentions of alcohol that were “positive” or linked to celebrities/attractive figures. The remainder were health warning or advice on cutting back for weight loss or health. Cosmopolitan contained 60 per cent of positive alcohol messages and/or linked to celebrities’ alcohol consumption. The paper will now look at each magazine in turn followed by a critical reflection on themes that emerged from the content analysis.

### Dolly Magazine

A search of the Dolly website found 11 mentions of the term “alcohol”. Of these, the majority (72 per cent) were related to celebrities and their abuse of alcohol. For example, under the headline, *Lilo charged with drinking*, a report detailed how Lindsay Lohan had been driving her Mercedes “after partying at LA hotspot Les Deaux”. The accompanying photo was of Lohan, with hearts depicted under her photograph. In a similar vein, another article, headlined *Jesse Metcalfe enters rehab* outlined how “the eye candy of Desperate Housewives” had

entered a treatment facility. Again a photograph pin up with hearts drawn underneath accompanied the article. Therefore, although the content is ostensibly negative regarding alcohol abuse, the photo and hearts give a positive impression of the celebrity. Another celebrity mention of Miley Cyrus, noted “while most girls are excited about being able to buy alcohol and get into nightclubs for the first time, Miley Cyrus can look forward to being a billionaire by the time she turns 18.” No mentions of “wine” or “beer” or “vodka” were found on the website search. The search appeared to contain material from 2011-2008.

### **Girlfriend Magazine**

Girlfriend’s website contained 12 references to the term “alcohol”. However, 4 of these were connected to skin care. Girlfriend did not link celebrities to alcohol. The online magazine did have two interactive sections which discussed alcohol and teens. One, titled *Your Say: Binge Drinking* asked for feedback on binge drinking from its readers. The other, titled *Your Say: Drinking Laws* asked for feedback from readers on increasing the legal drinking age. Both articles used the internet’s capacity for two-way communication between an organisation and its stakeholders. Three references were made to beer. A column from a male writer, titled *Pretty Reckless*, also sought feedback from readers on what risky behaviour they had been involved with. Another article, titled *Connect with Respect*, listed ways of holding a party responsibly and safely. No mention of wine or vodka was found, although there were three references to beer.

### **Cosmopolitan Magazine**

Perhaps not surprisingly, given its purportedly older target market, Cosmopolitan contained 115 references to “alcohol”. As discussed, more than 50 per cent of these portrayed alcohol in a positive light or linked it to celebrities. The very first reference is to celebrity Lady Gaga, under the title, *Lady Gaga is on the “drunk diet”* which goes on to quote Lady Gaga as saying she likes to work being drunk or hung over. Other references quote “research” which promotes drinking. For example, under the title *Champagne is heart healthy?* an article suggests that “two glasses of bubbly a day may be good for heart and circulation”. Another article, titled *Beer lovers unite!* quotes research to show that beer bellies are due to genetics and not beer consumption. *Beer goggles make men feel hotter*, *Heavier drinkers live longer*, *The Social Life* were all articles quoting research supposedly supporting drinking alcohol. Further articles were connected to advice on how to drink or serve alcohol, such as an article titled *The Cosmo Guide to Quaffing*. Two recent articles mention “FebFast”, with a columnist/blogger detailing her attempt to give up alcohol for one month. A minority of articles gave advice on giving up or reducing alcohol to lose weight, “detox” or because of pregnancy.

### **Cleo Magazine**

Cleo had approximately 70 articles with reference to the search term, alcohol. Recent articles do outline the dangers associated with alcohol. These include those titled *Alcohol cancer risk doubles*, and *If you knew you’d end up looking like this would you stop drinking*, *My year off the piss* and *Binge drinking does lasting harm to memory*. However, a further search of the terms beer, wine and vodka revealed a different picture of alcohol promotion. The search term “beer” yielded the most results for Cleo’s “Bachelor of the Year” with many of the bachelors, with accompanying photographs, listing beer as a favoured drink. The search for the term “wine” resulted in 70 articles. One article, under the heading *Bottled Hotness*, and with an accompanying photo of a bare-chested Jake next to a bottle of Omni Sparkling, reports “Gold

Coast Hottie Jake May is the winner of the Omni Bar & Bottleshop Bachelor of the Year Competition” and quotes Jake as saying “....Most importantly I work behind the bar at weekends where Omni sparkling wine flows freely and quenches unforgiving my thirst for beverage perfection.” Celebrities were also mentioned, with a story titled *How to party like Kate Moss* suggesting Moss would be most likely to drink vodka by choice.

### **Discussion, limitations and future research**

As evidenced, all online teenage girl magazines analysed had references to alcohol. The emphasis on celebrities (for example, Lady Gaga and Lindsay Lohan, “Lilo”) and other identities with “source credibility” (at least to teen girls) such as attractive males and females and magazine staffers (eg bloggers) was strong, and their (at times destructive) relationship to alcohol demonstrated, particularly in Cleo and Dolly. Cleo’s main blogger was depicted in her photograph with a drink in hand. In Cleo in particular, the link between sexual attractiveness to the opposite sex and alcohol consumption (for example Kate Moss and the bachelors) was clear, if not always overt. There is some evidence of health promotion, particularly in Girlfriend, which has used the internet to seek two-way communication from its readers on current issues affecting Australian teens, such as binge drinking. Recently, FebFast and abstinence for health were also promoted in Cleo and Cosmopolitan. Only one obvious promotion by alcohol brands was evident – the Omni bachelor story in Cleo.

This research has limitations in that it only looks at a small sample of Australian magazines and is restricted to online content analysis. A more in-depth study of photographs accompanying articles would be useful, particularly the paradox of attractive images (often of celebrities) v cautionary stories related to alcohol abuse. It is acknowledged that using the “search” facility is not a true depiction of the way young women would read an online publication. However this research is a first step and is believed to be the first of its kind to look at alcohol promotion in editorial in online magazines aimed at young women in Australia. With a picture of these powerful influencers of young women, future research could look at the way women “read” both editorial and advertising related to alcohol and compare the effects. An examination of other magazines read by young women, on and offline, including celebrity magazines such as New Weekly and OK! could broaden the research. Magazines aimed at young men could also be reviewed.

The research makes a contribution to the extant social marketing literature as it shows that alcohol is a feature of online magazines aimed at young women, an area not researched previously. The research has implications for social marketers and/or health promotion specialists, in particular, who could potentially enlist magazine editors and staff in the promotion of healthier attitudes and behaviour related to drinking. With such positive examples as mentions of FebFast and discussion in Girlfriend, it appears this may have started to occur. The research also raises the question of regulations related to media portrayal of alcohol. While the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) states that *advertising* should not depict alcohol relayed to personal...social...or sexual success, within the content analysed, there were many examples of this link, such as the Cleo Bachelors and Kate Moss. The ABAC does not apply to editorial – the question is: should it? As marketers increasingly turn to “below the line” approaches to promotion of alcohol, regulators may also have to focus their attentions beyond traditional advertising. As a start, understanding how magazines and other media both shape and reflect Australia’s problem with alcohol is important for the future of young Australians and the country’s health.

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