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**Master of Arts – Communication**

**Dissertation – Youth and New Zealand alcohol advertising on social media**

**How can New Zealand liquor companies conduct their brand online in a socially responsible manner; that positively impacts how youth interact with liquor, whilst retaining favourable financial returns?**

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the production and sale of alcohol is a multi-billion-dollar industry. My research aim is to find out the relationship that New Zealand youth have with the multi-billion-dollar alcohol industry, primarily on social media. I aim to discover more information around how young people interact with age-gating restrictions online through my research. My research questions outline the situation of the access younger age consumers might have to alcohol advertising online, if the users' date of birth is registered incorrectly on social networking platforms in order to see what implications there are to our current advertising standards. I surveyed 25 respondents aged 13-17 to gain qualitative data to gain perspectives and responses from the key target demographic who are under our legal drinking age within New Zealand. The unconscious consumer theory gives my research some context as to the impact the digital environment has on consumer behaviour. If youth mimic the actions represented in media, what are the implications of only seeing alcohol in a positive light, particularly for those that are not yet at the legal drinking age? To evoke change, there needs to be a value proposition for liquor brands to embrace social responsibility as more than just a marketing gimmick, but a social issue that their consumers know they are passionate about.

The alcohol industry can be categorised into four distinct groups : growers, manufacturers, retail, and hospitality. The two major alcohol producers within New Zealand, DB Breweries Ltd and Lion Pty Ltd, are not New Zealand owned companies but are owned by overseas conglomerates. In fact, of the top five alcohol producers within Aotearoa, only Delectable's wine is New Zealand-owned (Deloitte Top 200, 2021). In New Zealand the most widely used channel for purchasing retail alcohol is the supermarket, which can only sell beer, wine, cider and mead. There is also have a supermarket duopoly dominated by Foodstuffs and Countdown. A Ministry of Justice report 'The Effectiveness of Alcohol Pricing Policy,' (2014) states that due to the buying power of the supermarket duopoly, the price is so cheap that many smaller bottle stores buy their alcohol products from supermarkets (Ministry of Justice, 2014). There are also more than 1200 bottle stores in New Zealand, (Ibis World, 2022) with a market size of \$2 billion (Ibis World, 2022). Many of these liquor stores are owned by larger alcohol producers and retailers. "Liquorland and Henry's Beer Wines & Spirits are owned by Foodstuffs. In 2016, Foodstuffs bought the retail chain The Mill Liquorsave from Independent Liquor Ltd and rebranded them as Liquorland stores. Liquor King is owned by Lion" (ActionPoint, 2022). These factors contribute to the affordability for the consumer. In some instances, the liquor manufacturers are also the retail outlets for their product, essentially cutting out the distributor; and in other instances the same large buying power the supermarkets have increases when in addition to the supermarket chains, they also own chains of liquor stores.

Statistics NZ releases domestic figures on the alcohol tax, or excise tax, every quarter, revealing how much alcohol is consumed by the domestic market (Statistics New Zealand, 2021). In 2021, 499 million litres of alcoholic drinks were available for domestic consumption (ActionPoint, 2022). "This means that every New Zealander drinks an average of almost 2 standard drinks per day. This equates to the average New Zealander drinking 14 standard drinks every week, or 728 standard drinks every year. However, in

reality, it is known that rather than New Zealanders drinking small amounts daily, almost half of all alcohol (46%) in New Zealand is consumed in heavy drinking sessions” (ActionPoint, 2022).

The alcohol industry is a huge part of our economy, spending 80 million a year on advertising and sport sponsorship; however, harmful drinking costs the country 4.9 billion a year (in 2021). (ActionPoint, 2022) A third of all crime in New Zealand is alcohol related, and 250 New Zealanders die each year from alcohol related cancers, particularly liver disease. (ActionPoint, 2022) The reality is that alcohol costs the country far more than it brings in (Gower, 2022). “Alcohol contributed **\$1.193 billion** of government revenue in the form of excise tax. In contrast, alcohol misuse is estimated to cost New Zealand society **\$7.85 billion** each year” (ActionPoint, 2022). Alcohol is a financial burden to our country. If New Zealander’s can make a conscious effort to bring these statistics down even slightly, the benefits on the average tax paying New Zealander and New Zealand operating company would be huge.

However, despite the negative effects of alcohol, by embracing the notion of social responsibility, liquor companies could become agents of great change and contribute a positive impact to society. However, they would need to be given incentives, particularly financial incentives to do so. Increased pressure from consumers for companies to have an ethical stance is another impacting factor.

### ***A change in consumer behaviour trends***

We know alcohol costs our economy and is a financial burden, so it makes sense that the liquor companies would want to be agents of change, if only for the country's financial reasons alone.

Consumer behaviour trends are developing to reflect a more socially conscious consumer; the new generation of consumers is asking for more brands to be ethical, conscious and aware. We want to buy products with brands we connect with, and with which our values align. ‘Seventy percent of consumers want to know what the brands they support are doing to address social and environmental issues and 46% pay close attention to a brand's social responsibility efforts when they buy a product, according to a

survey released by Markstein' (Business Wire, 2019). Corporate social responsibility and consumer behaviour trends have stated that if done successfully, a brand can "simultaneously meet their business objectives and make a contribution to society." (MOHR et al., 2001) The world of social media has altered the traditional business model and allowed consumers to connect with brands. Consumers, are not wanting to simply be sold to anymore, we want to feel as though we are partners in the consumer-process journey. We are free to communicate freely to businesses and brands on their platforms, we share our user generated content of us as consumer utilising their products and we feel more connected than ever. (Thao, 2021) Instead of brands trying to sell, they are encouraged to foster relationships with their consumers online. "Fostering relationships with potential customers is the key to repeat purchases and increased brand loyalty." (Thao, 2021). This new, more transparent partnership-style business model means it is in the best interest of the alcohol industry to embrace social responsibility, particularly in their online presence and the way they interact with consumers online.

Atkinson (et all, 2017) states, that if we explore alcohol branded advertising online, brands are utilising the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube for their interactive branding and advertising strategies. This is the same media space in which young people are documenting elements of their lives which includes their own drinking culture. Young people analyse and make decisions about the image of themselves they want to portray online and are influenced by their peer groups. Drinking and cultural references to alcohol play a social function for young people, where they have a sense of belonging and bond through shared drinking experiences, valuing the creation of social memories with their peers. International research (Atkinson et al, 2017) has suggested that young people first start consuming alcohol at age 13. The online environment is therefore populated by underage drinkers and alcohol brands who utilise the space as an important aspect of their marketing mix.

(Atkinson et al, 2017) suggests that young people do not have to actively engage with alcohol branded content online to be exposed to it. Algorithm predications allows social media sites to target based on interaction with third party content such as music, sporting events and through the interactions their peers participate in. There are discussions around the current suitability of current self-regulation mechanisms. (Atkinson et al, 2017) Age-gating systems are only activated if the brand is using paid advertising on social media sites. However, their organic advertising (their unpaid marketing efforts) through likes, shares and interactions within peer groups relies on algorithms. Even with age gating systems, the social media platforms rely on the user's honesty when filling out the birth year upon registration and has no way to indicate whether that information is accurate or not.

### ***Young people, drinking and the social media mix – research conducted by Abby Dalgety***

In order to understand the context of young people and social media, it is important to first understand and consider how alcohol is “part of a young person's social scene, his or her ‘rite of passage’ into adulthood, recreational drinking and therapeutic drinking.” (Robinson & Kenyon, 2009). Drinking alcohol has almost become a symbol of adulthood within New Zealand. The traditional yard-glass of beer must be downed as fast as you can on your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. The proud feeling of showing your ID to buy alcohol on your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and hitting the club scene. Starting university after you leave high school is also saturated with excessive drinking, block parties and drinking games. This crossover of a social media environment that relies on honesty for age-gated consumer goods, and the New Zealand setting in which alcohol is a symbol of growing up and accomplishing adulthood led me to my research. Using focus groups and a survey, I set out to explore what alcohol advertising young people in New Zealand are exposed to on social media. My research questions outline the situation of the access younger age consumers might have to alcohol advertising, if the users’ date of birth is registered incorrectly on social networking platforms in order to see what implications there are to our current advertising standards.

I surveyed 25 respondents aged 13-17 to gain qualitative data to gain perspectives and responses from the key target demographic who are under our legal drinking age within New Zealand; in order to gain perspective as to whether this is an issue that the liquor companies should address and whether minors are seeing alcohol messaging online. This was the logical starting point to gain perspective and to understand the messaging this vulnerable audience may be exposed to.

When I put the question to the respondent group, 'Is your age currently incorrect on any of your personal social media platforms?', 48% of respondents said their age was incorrect. However, this number changed to 75% when asked the question, 'What was the age in which you signed up for social media?', with the average answer being 11 years old. As the minimum age for all the main social media platforms available within New Zealand (Facebook, Snap Chat, Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, Twitter) is 13, most of the respondents, unknowingly had an incorrect age on their social media sites, due to the minimum age requirements when they joined the platform. 100% of respondents said they believe other people their ages misrepresent their age online, with the majority stating that it was due to the minimum age requirements when they did not wish to be excluded from this content.

I found these findings were particularly interesting, having commenced this research with the preconceived mindset that teenagers were rebels and that was the cause for their misrepresentation of age online. I had investigated the history of teen culture, with the 1950s seeing the unfolding of a distinct 'teen' culture that is still relevant today. (Pieuchot & Douglas, 2013). In the 1950s teens sought to distance themselves from the culture of their parents. I even reflected on my own experience as a teen. It was cool to rebel, to not follow the rules, and I assumed that would be the main reason for misrepresenting your age online. It appears to be very simple and almost too easy to simply choose a birth date on a computer to access restricted material online. Interacting with age-gating systems relies

heavy on the user being accurate and not providing any misinformation, but with no checks and safety measures to ensure that information is correct. The research indicated that the simple fact that there was a minimum age to sign up to a social media platform of thirteen was the main reason as to why their social media account had an age that was incorrect. The research indicated that average age to sign up for a social media platform in New Zealand, with the key platforms being Snapchat and Instagram was 11. This then results with people on their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday now having access to age restricted advertisements as the platform believed they had just recently turned 18. Age restricted advertisements which are banned for those users under 18, would now be allowed to be shown, despite the users true age being under 18.

Surprisingly, when I asked the respondents, have you seen alcohol on social media through an advertisement, only 36% said yes, with 64% of respondents stating they believed they had not seen an alcohol advertisement on social media.

**"I only see alcohol advertising through influencers but don't think much of it as I am used to hearing about alcohol." (Dalgety, 2021)**

However, through further discussion through the open-ended question, what do you think about alcohol advertising on social media, including influencers who mention alcohol, there was an overwhelming response regarding to social media influencers mentioning alcohol.

**"I have seen influencer advertising about alcohol everywhere, Kendal Jenner and her tequila brand." (Dalgety, 2021)**

**"I have seen Kendall Jenner's tequila advertising and Ian Somerhalder advertising wine." (Dalgety, 2021)**

I formed the opinion that the respondents were unaware that when social media influencers talk about alcohol that this was classified as advertising. Some of their favourite celebrities and role models, often talked about alcohol even having their own alcohol brands.

The current New Zealand advertising standards, in particular the alcohol advertising and promotion code Principle 3, Guideline 3a, states “Alcohol Sponsorship Advertising and Promotion must target Adults and primarily promote the Sponsored Party” (ASA, 2022). This principle further states that 80% of the target audience must be above the restricted age and cannot be “cultural and sporting heroes or icons, celebrities and social media influencers that are currently popular with Minors and/or have particular appeal to Minors, may be used in Alcohol Sponsorship Advertising and Promotion” (ASA, 2022). The old code (prior to 2021) further stated what defines a hero or heroine of the young. People like Olympians, the All Blacks, Silver Ferns, musicians or actors where their target demographic was over 18. However, the revised code now states “Consumer research by Alcohol Advertisers may be appropriate to determine who or what is ‘currently popular’ or has ‘particular appeal.’” For most New Zealand advertisers, this process would be a relatively simple one, if they did in fact follow the process. There is many third-party survey, data collection and analytic tools we can use to define demographics. But I think back to the social media influencers that the minors mentioned during my research, and the fact that our two top players within the alcohol industry are all overseas-based. We are living in such a well-connected time. The internet and our social media platforms are not bound by geographical location. We can access information, people, heroes, consumer goods and brand from anywhere in the world. I can’t remember when the last time I consumed media that was made in New Zealand for fellow New Zealanders with the rise and popularity of international media creators such as Disney and Netflix.



Relying on large international brands to check in with the rules and regulations of every country that has access to their platform seems like an unachievable goal. A generalisation is often that brands and organisations often find a way around rules and regulations, and this shouldn't be a 'tick-box exercise.'

### ***The international digital connection and young people in New Zealand***

You can see the effects of our international digital connection already reflected in the dramatic shift with our young people and sport within New Zealand. "Basketball is now the second most-participated secondary-school sport after a massive 44.9% increase in players this decade." (Basketball NZ via NZ Herald, 2019). This coincides with the international rise of the NBA and their social media presence. Sports Business Journal found that the NBA's social media engagement is ranked first among sports leagues on a global scale. In fact, NBA related posts perform better for sports broadcasters as well. "NBA-related content accounted for seven of ESPN's top 10 posts on Instagram in '21." (Austin Karp for Sports Business Journal, 2021). Some of the most followed figures on social media are NBA players; take LeBron James, he has 127 million followers on Instagram. (Instagram, 2022). That is 9 times more the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge with a mere 13.9 million followers. We are no longer restricted by our geographical location to follow our sports stars and to tune in to our favourite sports, so it only makes sense that the people that our young people idolise and see as 'heroes and heroines' will now be international as well. We know that we cannot rely on these international figures to be responsible for safe drinking messages within the Aotearoa New Zealand context. The New Zealand Advertising Standards Authority (ASA, 2022) state that our ASA rules and regulations only apply to brands marketing and advertising to New Zealanders, and our influencer marketing rules and regulations only apply to influencers with a 'majority New Zealand demographic.' It is then left up to

New Zealand figures and the key players within the New Zealand alcohol industry to take on that social responsibility role, as it is very unlikely that we will see any public health messaging around alcohol that is relevant to the current climate in New Zealand from any of the international influencers promoting alcohol on social media platforms.

### ***Documenting our lives online***

Social media sites are a key function young people utilise to portray a representation of the self, online. The primary motivation for young adults to use Instagram was to gain knowledge of others, document events and experiences, and gain social appeal by appearing cool and creative” (Gray et al, 2018). Young people can construct their self-image narrative that expresses any certain tastes and lifestyle choices they desire. The content we post on social media helps us “construct our reality around stories. We get to decide who we want to be, what values we want to stand behind” (Maisei, 2016). Constructing this self-image and narrative on social media is presented within the visual symbols of consumerism. These consumerism engagement strategies are now widely implemented in our online environments through branding and advertising. Rather than positioning the audience as passive viewers of advertising, the online environment has included consumers within the marketing of the content creation.

All free media platforms rely on advertising dollars to pay for the site build, and social media is no different. Social media platforms rely on advertising as their key function. Although there has been a rise in paid subscription-based media platforms, the big social media platforms remain free of charge, with the common understanding in the internet-age dictum that, if the product is free, you are the product (Lanchester, 2017). Consumers enter in their personal details and relevant information to obtain a

social media account, often without hesitation about what that information will be used for. Data leaks and privacy issues have plagued social media companies for the past few years, with no impact in the number of consumers signing up for their platforms. Facebook for example, has “1.9 billion daily users access Facebook’s platform, a 6.89% increase year-over-year” (Dean, 2022). Instagram, another Facebook-owned platform is also seeing growth. “In 2021, there were 1.21 billion monthly active users of Meta's Instagram, making up over 28 percent of the world's internet users. By 2025, it has been forecast that there will be 1.44 billion monthly active users of the social media platform, which would account for 31.2 percent of global internet users” (Dixon, 2022). TikTok, one of the younger, less established social media sites has recorded a huge growth year on year. “In September 2021, social video app TikTok reported 1 billion monthly active users worldwide, representing a 45 percent growth compared to the previously reported figure of 689 million MAU in July 2020” (Ceci, 2022). Photo sharing site Snap Chat is no different to the other platforms, also seeing huge growth year on year. “Snapchat had 332 million daily active users worldwide, up from 319 million global DAU in final quarter of 2021” (Dixon, 2022). Social media sites such as Facebook, TikTok, Snap Chat and Instagram need content, obviously, because that’s what the site consists of: content that other people have created (Lanchester, 2017). We can make the connection that these sites are growing because we are consuming their content. Without active engaged users, they would serve no purpose.

On the other hand, research indicates that increasingly that we need these social media platforms more than they need us. They have become a necessity within our lives. It has become increasingly popular when seeking out breaking news, that the audience heads to social media, with the awareness that users share experiences, often faster than our reporting journalists can do. Social media has morphed into more than a simple communication platform, but is engrained in our entertainment and media consumption. We often seek gratification from our peers online, a platform where we can depict a

particular version of our life. Social media has allowed us to curate a lifestyle we would like others to perceive, sharing the good, and very often not the bad.

“There's no question that the line between our ‘real’ lives and those that we project online is becoming increasingly faded. Although technological identities are manifested out of ourselves, they are also concocted. Too often, we see people spend more time viewing the landscape from atop the summit of a hike or a ski hill through their five-inch iPhone screen than through their own eyes” (Dunfee, 2015.)

When it comes to our drinking habits, young people can be observed striving to find the cute-looking canned RTD, trying to find a drink to hold in hand for the ‘Cheers!’ picture, popping a filter on the photo of the latest cool brand craft beer or preparing that Instagram-ready cocktail to showcase to their online friends. As our binge-drinking statistics have declined, and we are not only more conscious of the health implications that the food and beverage we consumer may have, and we have become more ‘socially aware’. Is it possible that we have swapped one unhealthy relationship with alcohol with another unhealthy relationship; the desire to document and curate an alcohol and drinking persona online? The online environment allows us to curate an identity as someone who is cool, drinks beautiful drinks and keeps up with the latest trends, when our realities can often be wildly differing. After talking with young people through my research, I believe the excessive need to document our lives online has impacted our drinking culture. “Social network sites encourage drinking and normalize intoxicogenic drinking cultures among young people.” (Törrönen, et al. 2019). Furthermore, social media is a forum designed to share information. Drinking alcohol is often a rite of passage for young people, and therefore this forum is utilised by young people to share information, which for them, includes their first relationship with drinking alcohol.

It is often reported that binge drinking is the biggest issue our society faces when it comes to alcohol. We have seen the binge drinking statistics have fallen (Gower, 2021), yet the relationship between alcohol and social media is often overlooked. With the previous statistics about our social media usage, it only makes sense to pose the question; is the relationship between social media and alcohol becoming an unhealthy obsession.

### ***Is this an advertisement?***

The rise of social media influencers provides a grey area between what is organic content and what is a paid marketing effort. "Influencers can act as cooperation partners, integrating commercial content into organic narratives, or as independent critics" (Borchers, N. 2021). I believe it is the seemingly seamless integration of this content into their lifestyle which gives the appearance to the audience that they are no longer watching a paid placement but a glimpse into a sometimes-unobtainable glamorous lifestyle. New Zealand influencer Simone Anderson has faced numerous ASA complaints in the past, many which were upheld due to their commercial nature not being clear to audiences. (Stuff, 2021). Ms Anderson has been perceived as being misleading her social media audience, due to the vast majority of her 'personal content' being free gifts or product given to her to promote for a sum of cash. Simone has settled most of these complaints by simply deleting her offending posts or amending them to state they are an #AD.

Our current Advertising Standards state that it should be obvious to the audience that they are viewing an advertisement (ASA, 2022). They have tackled this issue by requiring social media influencers to state online with the hashtag #AD if their online content has been dictated by a brand or organisation, either through an exchange of money, goods or services. However, despite the label #AD, these influencers are placing this paid content seamlessly within their own day to day, portraying that this advertisement is

merely just compensation for utilising a product or service that is already integrated into part of their lifestyle. That is essentially the role social media influencers play within our current society, and the audience is well aware of this fact. They are gifted goods and services and sometimes paid in affiliate codes or money compensation to promote goods and services, in order for them to live a glamorous lifestyle of creating content to entertain their loyal following. It is commonplace to see social media influencers thank their followers for the views their #AD's get and that their contribution as an active advertisement viewer allows them to continue to do what they love doing, being our entertainment source. The current Advertising Standards also state that no babies or children are to be featured in any advertising promotion or advertising. (ASA, 2022). Simone Anderson also had numerous complaints breaching the ASA rules around alcohol promotion as she has recently produced content which featured her own baby in posts that were a paid promotion of alcohol. (Otago Daily Times, 2022). "One complainant against Anderson raised concerns about posts that promoted alcohol brands, including Lighthouse Gin, Te Kairanga Estate and Te Whare Ra wines. Those posts both included pictures of Anderson's baby son, including a picture of her feeding him a bottle while holding a glass of wine. The person also complained about a post promoting a restaurant which included pictures of her son staring at cocktails." (Otago Daily Times, 2022) The New Zealand Advertising Standards Authority do not give fines, they are a collective of representatives of the advertising industry focused on education. Simone Anderson is informed and recommended that she amends her posts, and she can continue to reoffend. (Robinson & Kenyon, 2009) which looked at a lot of similar alcohol advertising standards across the world concluded that this was a similar problem all countries face. Instead of focusing on ticking the boxes for rules, we should be focused on all brands wanting to do better in adherence to ethical codes around alcohol driven by the consumer. We should encourage good practice rather than a 'check the box' exercise.

It is important to note that the current New Zealand Advertising Standards Authority are self-governed by the advertising industry, and therefore they are often breaching their own self-imposed rules and regulations. (Liquor Firms Flout Own Rules on Targeting Children and Sexualised Ads, 2021) found that there was often a repetitive pattern where certain companies could break their own self-imposed rules, apologise, take the offending advert down and continue with business as usual. One example of an offending advertisement was a Facebook and Instagram video “which features user-generated content of an Auckland Grammar student, in a sports uniform, kicking a rugby ball through the posts on a field. Two young boys were also on the field consuming Carlsberg beer. According to the complaint, the advertisement appeared to have been filmed on the grounds of Auckland Grammar school.” (Liquor Firms Flout Own Rules on Targeting Children and Sexualised Ads, 2021) This advert was viewed more than 110,000 times before an ASA complaint and is still available now through private social media accounts. “Dr Nicki Jackson, Executive Director of Alcohol Healthwatch, says "Responsibility for protecting our children and vulnerable people from harmful, ubiquitous alcohol advertising should not be delegated to alcohol advertisers. Regulatory standards are long overdue." (*Ineffective Voluntary Code for Alcohol Advertising Must Be Scrapped*, n.d.) Although, I too agree that the New Zealand Government should do more with more vigorous unbiased regulatory standards for alcohol advertising, I do believe it is in the alcohol companies' best interest to do more with the participation of upholding our current standards, and it would still provide adequate financial return due to the change in current consumer behaviour. I believe you can both promote alcohol safely and remain financially beneficial to all parties involved.

### ***The unconscious consumer***

The unconscious consumer theory states that we mimic the actions that we see, quite often referred to as the unconscious consumer. In fact, “many choices are made unconsciously and are strongly affected by the environment” (Dijksterhuis, A. *et al*, 2005.) However, if we then mimic the actions from those with a celebrity or influencer status, we head into a realm that is often unobtainable and out of our salary bracket to try to mimic. This can be explained through the Modelling Theory. Modelling Theory highlights the importance of observation, examination and imitation of the individual audience viewpoint through the observations of people portrayed through media, and how it can shift their own behaviour, knowledge, values and attitudes. “The imitation is more likely to happen if the model holds an admired status and the activity that they do are of great value” (Communicationtheory.org, 2022). Modelling Theory explains that people have a want or a desire to duplicate the actions of those that we idolise. It is not a new concept either, for years we look up to celebrities and people with power with admiration for what they do, with often the unconscious or conscious feeling that if we mimic their actions or take the pathways they chose, we too could lead this lifestyle. However, we must consider the implications of this ‘copying of behaviour’ when it comes to things that become hazardous, such as excessive or binge drinking, or an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, and an additional caution when the audiences are vulnerable.

For years there has been a focus on the extreme portrayal of alcohol on social media; the depiction of dangerous drinking, injury and excess (Hendriks et al., 2018). However, my observation is the representation of the normality of the regular drinker since the presence of social media and its function of documenting our day to day lives. The photo of the family barbeque with beers in hand, the wedding cheers, or the ‘long day after work’ post that seem to be a part of the ordinary content in which we see online. Hendriks et al, concluded that alcohol posts online are in fact often, a mild depiction of alcohol and drinking behaviours. You are more likely to see alcohol in the background, on



tables etc, with a very low occurrence of the extreme depiction of excessive drinking. “This could imply that positive associations with alcohol consumption are more visible on social media than negative associations, potentially leading to an underestimation of alcohol-related risks” (Hendriks et al., 2018)

For the most part, consumers in 2022 have a fair understanding of social media and its implications since it gained popularity in the early 2000’s and has been a dominant part of lives for two decades. We willingly enter our personal data, including our age, in order to access these free social media platforms. The New Zealand Advertising Authority has left the age restriction in the hands of the social networking sites directly; after all, we do enter in our personal data to access the sites, knowing that this data is then going to be used to curate a feed with customised advertising to our individual interests. For age-restricted products such as alcohol, with a legal drinking age of 18 in New Zealand, it seems a simple action to rely on that personal information we have entered to access these platforms, to dictate if we are in fact old enough to view advertising content on restricted products. However, what if users, typically minors, enter in false information? Thirteen is the minimum age requirement for all the popular social media sites, (Facebook, Instagram, Snap Chat and Tik Tok) but what if there are users under 13? Clearly their birth date would be incorrect, and the ripple on effect that this has, is age restricted content can advertise to them without breaking any of the rules or regulations.

An important question to answer is, is this a problem? Why should liquor companies change the way they conduct their brand online? We know our binge drinking statistics have fallen dramatically, not just for youth but for all New Zealanders. In 2011, 71% of 15–17-year-olds had a drink in the past year, in 2021 that number had dropped to 59% (Gower, 2022). We know that as a society we are more health

conscious, and the statistics prove we are reducing our alcohol intake. However, the alcohol industry is New Zealand is still an extremely profitable one. This more health conscious and socially responsible trend has not affected their bottom line. "This trend has helped liquor retailers offset the effect of declining per capita alcohol consumption, with higher quality craft beers and wine typically attracting a higher price tag." (Ibis World - Liquor Retailing in New Zealand trends 2017-2022) Consumer behaviour has changed, and therefore the way liquor companies conduct their brand online should also change. There can still be a profitable return by embracing social responsibility. My observation is that it is not how we are drinking, it is why we are drinking, and our relationship with alcohol is still an extremely unhealthy one. 1 in 5 New Zealander's are still considered a hazardous drinker. (Gower, 2022) As stated previously, hazardous drinking costs the New Zealand economy. However, New Zealand is not alone. Iceland has had a similar history with binge drinking behaviour. In the early 90's, Iceland had the highest binge drinking rates in Europe. Today, it has the lowest. How did they turn this around? Iceland banned alcohol advertising in 1998. Although not a perfect model, we can still access a lot of advertising material in this digital age; by reducing the alcohol advertising that you are able to, has made a huge difference in Iceland.

### ***Iceland alcohol law – a case study***

"Alcohol Law (Áfengislög) states that "all advertising and marketing is banned (since a law change in 2011.)" In addition, The Law on Media states that commercial messages and teleshopping for alcohol are forbidden. It is also prohibited to show consumption or any other usage of alcohol in advertising or for information on any other commodity or service." (Nordicalcohol.org, 2022). Over the years there has been the argument to reverse this law within Iceland for the economic impact that tax and alcohol advertising can bring to the country of Iceland, but a 2018 study (Market and Media

Research, 2018) found that 60% of Icelandic respondents were opposed to alcohol advertising being reintroduced. Icelandic people had seen first-hand the benefits that an alcohol advertising ban can have on their binge drinking culture and they did not want to turn back and revert to their past high rate of binge drinking statistics, and a youth population that was highly dependent on restricted substances. Iceland went from the worst binge drinking country within Europe, to having the lowest binge drinking rate in Europe (Gower, 2022). In addition to the advertising ban, Iceland also set out with some youth focused initiatives to curb their youth binge drinking and drug use behaviour. “Twenty years ago, Icelandic teens were among the heaviest-drinking youths in Europe. You couldn’t walk the streets in downtown Reykjavik on a Friday night because it felt unsafe. There were hordes of teenagers getting in-your-face drunk.” (Jónsson & Milkman, 2017). There is a curfew on underage youth, and a monetary scheme to get under 18’s into sport, music and leisure activities in order to keep them aware from alcohol and partying and to help provide them with another outlet that does not rely on substance abuse. “Today, Iceland tops the European table for the cleanest-living teens. The percentage of 15- and 16-year-olds who had been drunk in the previous month plummeted from 42 percent in 1998 to 5 percent in 2016.” (Young, 2017) This concept is evidence-based around the brain chemistry and the theory behind the cause of addiction. By offering a variety of alternatives to seeking out substance abuse as a coping mechanism such as sport, music and art; young people can experience a different aspect of life and develop better coping mechanisms through an alternative ‘rush’ - the natural high of hobby and leisure activities. At the same time, this scheme, which was implemented in Iceland, provides young people with valuable life skills, and eliminates prior financial barriers to such activities. Efforts to raise drinking ages and prohibiting restricted items to young people has never been a successful method to get young people to stop using these items. It is a pattern we have seen throughout history, that prohibition is never the answer. Instead, in the Icelandic case study, their government knew that if young people still wanted to drink, they would inevitably find a way to do so, so they equipped them

with a better coping mechanism and life skills to hopefully steer them away from utilising substances as way to cope with their mental and physical health during their teenage years.

What can New Zealand learn from this? I believe prohibition is not the answer. We have seen that over the course of New Zealand's history with the '6 o'clock swill' early bar closing that was implemented in 1918 and the attempt at restricting alcohol purchasing. "New Zealand's binge-drinking culture has been blamed on the fact that six o'clock closing taught generations of men to drink as fast as possible." (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2020). Robinson & Kenyon, 2009, also discuss that within the alcohol advertising industry, it is very complex, and we are better to focus on a better operating strategy for alcohol advertising rather than a blanket ban. The area is complicated, and in our international digital environment, it is too complex to maintain a ban or restrictions across different countries, especially when the media we consume is often on a global platform. However, social media is a proven medium to share health messages to a mass audience to influence change. "Findings indicated use of social media was an effective way to deliver messages and resulted in positive behaviour change." (Kessler & Kurtz, 2019). The alcohol industry should embrace the shared responsibility and embrace the dialogue around responsible alcohol practice, as consumer behaviour is driving a more ethical stance from brands. Regulation should focus on good practice and the want to self-adhere to rules and regulations rather than a forced ethical conduct. (Robinson & Kenyon, 2009). In addition, I also believe the change of mindset over time and the excess of information that we are bombarded with around health and wellness and prioritising self-care has changed the way in which we view our world. In addition to making more conscious decisions as consumers with the phasing out of plastic bags, and the variety of environmentally friendly options available to us now; it only makes sense that we look at our alcohol culture with the same lens. Instead of prohibitive alcohol measures, putting ownership back on to the alcohol brands to become more socially responsible around alcohol messaging

will ensure us as the active audience, are fully equipped with our own coping mechanisms and life skills that do not require the need to rely on substances.

In the (Atkinson et al., 2017) United Kingdom based study, a compelling point their research uncovered was that alcohol brands seldomly touched on the negative implications that drinking and alcohol can have on the consumer. There is a very minimal amount of alcohol health advisory advertising or messaging on the major social media sites, particularly aimed at young people. Most of the brands this UK study analysed, did not distinctly promote responsible drinking or where one could find help if they required it. I see this as a particular area for improvement, particularly in the online environment where young people are easily influenced. We have already seen the online usage behaviour for young people, combined with labelling theory, which provides for a melting pot of potentially disastrous mimicking behaviour online.

The last ten years has seen a huge growth in the success of brands that have taken an ethical stance on various issues, such as climate change, social and injustice, fair trade, health and environmental factors, packaging and waste. This growth in both popularity and sales has resulted in a global phenomenon (Szmigin, et al. 2007). "Research has recurrently shown that it is in the best interest of brands to behave in an ethical way because the customers increasingly expect brands to both embody and reflect their ethical interests." (Sierra, et al. 2017) In the current socio-economic environment, it has increasingly become a need for brands to outline their social and ethical stance on various issues. Social media has played a part in this as a two-way communication channel with the consumer and brand, where we can ask directly what we are expecting from the brand. Internationally, we have already seen some alcohol brands take an ethical stance and see a financial pay off.

Taking an ethical stance is not always seen in a positive manner. Some brands have been perceived “using Corporate Social Responsibility as a marketing gimmick.” (Wu, *et al.* 2020) Often referred to as ‘greenwashing’, consumers are catching on, and can often see through a brand when they are motivated entirely by profits and are more active with pursuing brands “motivated not only by profit, but also by a genuine concern for the social good.” (Wu, *et al.* 2020). For this to be a success for both the alcohol brands, and youth in New Zealand; the issue needs to be addressed with a lot of thought and planning, and more than just a token gesture.

In conclusion, I believe there is strong evidence to support the need for better social responsibility around alcohol messaging on social media in the New Zealand context. Alcohol brands should play their part in correctly informing their audience and potential consumers around alcohol usage as the research indicates that there is no barrier to minors also accessing alcohol advertising within the online environment. Age-gating systems and controls provide little deterrent to those minors wanting to access messages that was designed for a demographic of the legal drinking age in New Zealand. Although not malicious in purpose, the research uncovered those minors do see alcohol messaging frequently on social media and the current age-gating restrictions are not fit for purpose. My research indicated that young people are unaware of the consequences of entering an online space fraudulently with the true/or actual average age of a young person signing up to a social media platform being 11. Liquor companies have a social responsibility to their consumers around the promotion of alcohol. In return, consumers are asking for companies and brands to take an ethical stance and favour spending money with companies and brands that are seen to be taking an ethical stance. By taking an ethical stance and promoting social responsibility, you are ensuring not only favourable financial returns, but also ensuring we are protecting our vulnerable audiences through our social media content.

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