

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: An Alcohol-Related Advertisement Every 60 Seconds

Brienna N. Rutherford, Janni Leung, Daniel Stjepanovic, Jason P. Connor and Gary C.K. Chan

National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research, The University of Queensland | School of Psychology, The University of Queensland | National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales | Discipline of Psychiatry, The University of Queensland

Aims

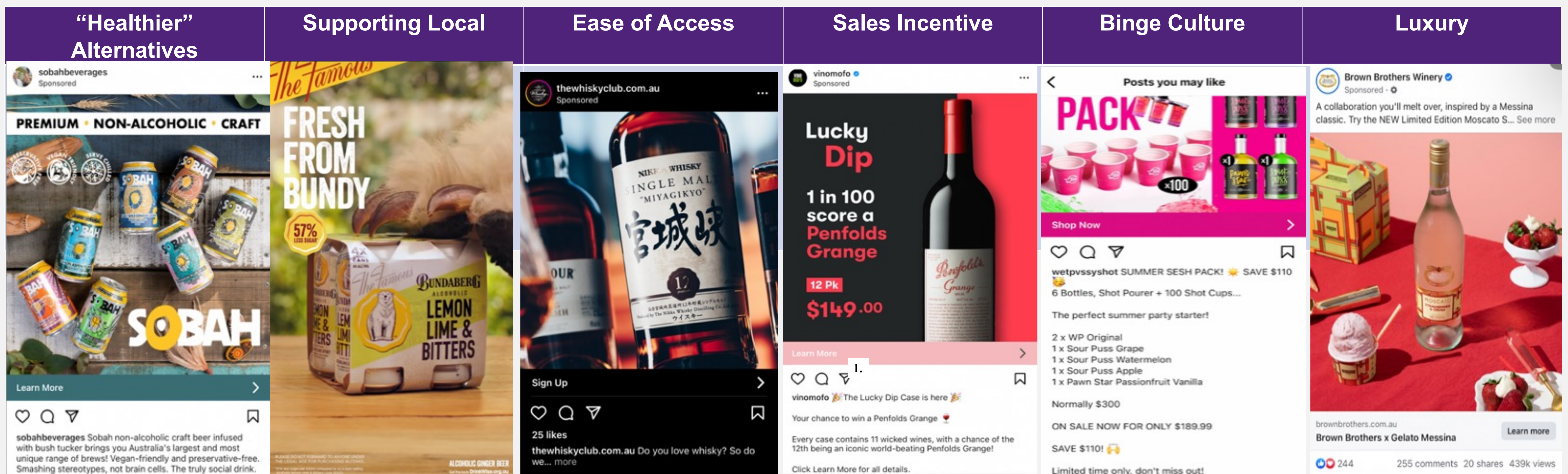
There is growing concern over the presence of substance-related advertisements on social media platforms frequented by youths and young adults due to the lack of regulations regarding online advertising behaviours. This study aims to build upon existing research that assesses the frequency with which young Australians (17–25 years) are being shown advertisements which promote substance use (e.g., alcohol, vaping, cannabis, other drugs) and the themes of these advertisements on popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

Methods

A total of 125 Australian youths (mean age 18.74 years; 74.40% female) were recruited in exchange for course credit to participate in an online study. Participants scrolled through their chosen social media platform, being Facebook or Instagram, for a period of 30 min and screenshotted any substance-related advertisements encountered. A systematic thematic analysis was then conducted to identify non-mutually exclusive themes present in the advertisements. Demographic, social media usage and historical personal, peer or familial substance use behaviour data was also collected.

Results

A total of 796 alcohol-related advertisements were identified, indicating that Australian youths are exposed to one substance-related advertisement every 60 seconds on average. Most advertisements included a link for instantaneous purchasing on both Facebook (78.80%) and Instagram (71.17%). Advertisements relating to Ease of Access, Sales Incentives and Supporting Local were most common across both platforms



Similar frequencies in theme prominence were observed in both the Instagram ($n = 557$) and Facebook ($n = 239$) samples. Advertisements on both Instagram (46.84%) and Facebook (43.70%) featured *Sales Incentives* themes most predominantly. These advertisements included references to bonus samples, promotional codes, or other special offers to incentivise viewers to complete a purchase of the depicted substance. Advertisements promoting the *Ease of Access* to depicted products were also common in the sample on both Instagram (42.56%) and Facebook (41.72%). *Supporting Local* was the next most common theme depicted in substance-related advertising (Instagram = 35.13%; Facebook = 31.78%), with this content including slogans or descriptions that indicated the product was Australian owned or sourced.

Conclusions

Alcohol-related advertisements are highly prevalent online, particularly among Australian youth social media users. These advertisements provide consumers with the opportunity to purchase products and promote use through sales incentives and ease of access. The current lack of regulation regarding advertisements on social media should be a public health focus.

Acknowledgement

BR is supported by The University of Queensland (UQ) Graduate School Scholarship. GCKC and JL are supported by a NHMRC Investigator Fellowship. JL is supported by a UQ Development Fellowship. NCYSUR is supported by Commonwealth funding from the Australian Government provided under the Drug and Alcohol Program.