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Short report

'Responsible drinking' programs and the alcohol industry in Brazil: Killing two birds with one stone?

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the Brazilian alcohol industry – which for years has ignored alcohol problems – inaugurated responsible drinking programs (RDPs). This paper reports findings from an exploratory study that investigated the RDP-related activities of six leading alcohol companies in Brazil (three national, three transnational) focusing on program goals and components, target populations and evaluation methods. Interviews were conducted from October 2007 to February 2008 with nine key-informants, and 71 corporate documents were collected along with additional web information about the programs. Content analysis of interviews and institutional documents was used to identify the companies' RDP activities. Three types of RDPs were found that focused respectively on institutional action, drinking and driving, and underage drinking. All three transnational firms were involved in RDPs, whereas national firms demonstrated limited involvement. The majority of RDPs were implemented using television. No targeted research appears to have been undertaken by the companies to assess the efficacy of the strategies in terms of changes in drinking behavior. The evidence for both national and transnational firms means that is difficult to confirm that the responsible drinking programs produced so far in Brazil have been undertaken to systematically reduce alcohol problems, or mainly as part of a public relations strategy to reduce criticism and potentially forestall government regulations (Babor, 2006, 2009; Jernigan, 2009).

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Introduction

The last two decades have seen a sustained emphasis in research on the effects of alcohol marketing on alcohol consumption. The benefits of this work include an increased understanding in the health community and general population of the importance of regulating alcohol marketing to help reduce related harm. As part of this effort, researchers have analyzed the communication strategies and impacts of alcohol industry responsible drinking programs (RDPs) in North America, Australia and Europe (Barry & Goodson, 2010; Munro, 2004; Wallack, 1992). However, although these studies found that RDPs were not effective prevention strategies and had more to do with public relations than public interest (DeJong, Atkin, & Wallack, 1992; Wolburg, 2005), this line of research has remained underdeveloped in Brazil.

The alcohol industry has positioned RDPs as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. The concept of CSR dates back to the 1970s, when public concern about the consequences of unregulated economic growth helped revive notions of social responsibility in corporations (Banerjee, 2008; Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Since the end of the 1990s, however, when American court settlements required tobacco companies to make internal documents public, the legitimacy of CSR has been called into question in cases where a commercial product has been found to cause latent harms, as is the case with tobacco, alcohol, and fire arms (Biglan, 2011; Cavalcante, Carvalho Ade, & Rangel, 2006).

The RDPs of transnational alcohol companies have been found in previous research to share several interrelated assumptions: a) responsible drinking can be learned; b) how people drink and in what circumstances determines whether their experiences are positive or negative; c) third-party organizations – (Anderson, 2003) calls these “social aspects organizations” – can effectively represent the industry in policy debates and influence the development of alcohol policy; d) alcohol marketing should be self-regulated; e) despite some apparent risks, alcohol can also provide benefits to society, like pleasure (Anderson, 2003; ICAP, 2011).

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In Brazil, and in South America more generally, policy development and research on alcohol marketing have evolved slowly. The Brazilian government has undertaken a series of initiatives over the last several years aimed at reducing alcohol misuse, but harm rates remain high: fully 25% of adults recently reported at least one problem related to drinking and 9% reported alcohol dependence. Among teenagers, 21% of males and 12% of females reported binge drinking (Laranjeira, Pinsky, Sanches, Zaleski, & Caetano, 2010; Pinsky, Sanches, Zaleski, Laranjeira, & Caetano, 2010). In this paper we investigate alcohol industry RDPs in Brazil in the context of CSR and alcohol control policies in the country, using findings from qualitative research that examined the RDP strategies of alcohol firms operating there. The exploratory study focused on the RDP goals, program components, target populations and evaluation methods of the six leading alcohol companies in Brazil (three transnational – Diageo, Ambev and Femsal – and three national – Schincariol, Müller and Petrópolis) with the goal of better understanding the industry's RDP strategies.

Methods

Sample selection

The study focused on the top six Brazilian alcohol companies, based on market share and national alcohol consumption data. The four largest breweries by market share (Femsal, Ambev, Cervejaria Petrópolis and Schincariol Group) in 2008 collectively produced 95% of the beer sold in Brazil (SINDICERV, 2005). Beer is a prevalent alcoholic drink in Brazil and constitutes more than 50% of all alcohol doses consumed annually (Laranjeira et al., 2010; Pinsky et al., 2010). The other two alcohol companies in the sample (Diageo and Companhia Müller de Bebidas) produce pre-mixed drinks or “alcopops” (spirits mixed with soda or industrialized juice) as well as other alcohol products.

Data collection

As no authoritative list was found of RDPs in Brazil, the first phase of the project was to develop a database of programs using Google and corporate websites. All RDP information found on the Internet relating to the sample was listed and subsequently analyzed for contents relating to program goals and components. Three different types of programs were found: i) institutional action: programs to raise awareness at point-of-purchase (POP) and in the workplace; ii) drink-driving: campaigns targeted at raising awareness about the consequences of driving while intoxicated (Cramer et al., 2011); and iii) underage drinking: programs aimed at discouraging underage drinking and enforcing the legal purchase age.

After an initial content analysis of the web information (Bardin, 2004), the companies were contacted by phone to identify key-informants (KIs). The selection criteria were that the person had to a) work in the company and b) be nominated by more than one employee in the company as the individual responsible for RDPs. If the individual who answered the initial phone call did not know who was in charge of RDPs, they were asked to transfer the call to an employee who might know. One KI from each company was identified and five semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) were conducted from October 2007 to February 2008 in the state of São Paulo, Brazil, by three Brazilian researchers, three interviews face-to-face (Ambev, ABRABE/Petrópolis, Femsal) and two by phone (Müller and Schincariol). The sixth interview was scheduled with Diageo, but ended after 5 min when the KI discovered one of the investigators was a well-known researcher on the negative effects of alcohol marketing in Brazil.

The companies determined the location, medium (face-to-face or by phone) and number of people for each interview. Müller's and Schincariol's KIs elected not to grant a face-to-face interview on the grounds they were not involved in RDPs and had no one who could discuss the topic. Petrópolis' KI similarly reported they were not involved in RDPs, but nevertheless provided a joint interview with two representatives from ABRABE (Brazilian Association of Beverages). Ambev's KI also arranged for a joint interview with two other employees. As a result, in five sessions, nine individuals were interviewed using a semi-structured guide (Patton, 2002): three from Ambev's Press Office and Institutional Marketing Department; two directors from ABRABE; one each from Müller's Marketing Department, Schincariol's Press Office, Femsal's External Relations Department, and Petrópolis' Executive Board. The guide focused on program components, goals, target populations and evaluation, and accommodated different organizational contexts.

Corporate documents (paper and electronic) were collected during the web search and the interviews, resulting in 71 internal and external documents – 42 from Ambev, 10 from Femsal, 13 from Diageo and 6 from Schincariol. Internal documents were obtained from the KIs during the interviews or through post or email. These materials included print advertisements, corporate reports, newsletters, pamphlets, and electronic documents and presentations. Ambev's KI prepared a briefcase containing brochures, magazine ads and folders of its RDPs. FEMSAL's KI also sent by post its RDP pamphlets. External documents were collected from the companies' websites or those of partners such as marketing agencies, and included press releases, online corporate reports, television commercials, and online pamphlets.

The research project was reviewed and approved by the Brazilian Research Ethics Committee from the Federal University of São Paulo in compliance with funding and institutional requirements.

Data analysis

The corporate documents and interviews were analyzed using a content analysis protocol that followed a coding, categorization, and inference process (Bardin, 2004; Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2008). All corporate documents were reviewed in joint sessions with three readers, and categories were developed that captured the full range of RDP-related contents. Areas of disagreement or uncertainty were resolved by re-examining the materials in the group and, where necessary, by obtaining clarification from the companies' representatives through email. Two forms of data triangulation were used, as suggested by Patton (2002): triangulation of source (KI interviews, external documents and internal documents), and analyst triangulation (categorization and inference by two or more researchers). Such procedures provide the best guarantee of validity and reliability with qualitative data. In this way, interpretations and inferences could be developed along with plausible explanations and conclusions.

Four kinds of documents and goals were described. The first, ‘institutional communication’, included documents aimed at informing stakeholders (mainly shareholders) about the company's RDPs, such as annual reports, newsletters, and corporate policies. Second, ‘specialized communication’ encompassed responsible drinking messages that were not directly related to the companies' brands and not widely accessible to general consumers, e.g., FEMSAL's educational pamphlets about responsible consumption that are distributed during public visits to its factories or at consumers' request. Third, ‘supply chain communication’ was used to inform retailers about responsible drinking messages, such as campaigns to not sell to minors. Finally, ‘mass communication’ such as television commercials and print advertisements were targeted at the general public and widely accessible, and could carry a specific

brand or the company's corporate logo, in order to "promote responsible consumption". Details about the documents can be found in the [Supplementary material](#).

The interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using the same content analysis approach with the goal of obtaining more detailed information about RDPs, and capturing the KIs actual comments. The first step was to code the responses according to program goals and components, target populations and evaluation. Next, the researchers looked for key comments and explanations associated with these categories (Patton, 2002).

Results

Institutional action

Diageo started a server training program in 2000 which annually selects 50 socially vulnerable youth to attend six months of classes and on-the-job training to work in the hospitality sector. The program includes modules on the labor market, self-promotion, computing, commercial practices, personal health and a bartender guide. The latter encompasses bartender duties, operations, beverages, and social responsibility (legislation, information about binge drinking, moderation, how to deal with a drunk client, how to notice if a client drank too much). Program information is disseminated through reports and folders (institutional communication).

Femsa has produced an educational pamphlet for waiter training since 2007. The "Responsible Alcohol Consumption: Guide for Waiters" focuses on family responsibility, customer relations, types of alcoholic drinks, alcohol content of beverages, alcohol interactions with the human system, and physical and psychological effects. Although technically a form of a supply chain communication, the guide also represents a specialized form of communication because its distribution takes place through POPs, visits to the company's factories (about 25,000 visitors per year, 60% are waiters) and a partnership with the Brazilian waiters association and also through call centers and sponsorship of public events. According to Femsa's KI:

"Our obligation is to disclose what we know [about beer] and we have been doing it through the pamphlets."

Ambev began an education and certification program in 2001 for Brazilian bars and restaurants called "Real Academia do Chopp" ("Royal Draft Beer Academy"). Since 2004, the company has included three social responsibility criteria (among 31 criteria overall) in the review process for certification: visible signs forbidding sales to underage drinkers, buyer's ID check, and visible signs pointing out the risks of drinking and driving. The company's KI reported that to achieve a "responsible consumption" designation, a bar must meet at least two of these criteria in addition to satisfying 90% of the 31 overall criteria. It was reported that 76% of the beer bars and restaurants and 66% of the *chopp* bars and restaurants from the total establishments certified by the program in 2007 scored in the criteria range of "responsible consumption". In 2008, the figure was only 2100 bars or approximately 0.21% of all bars in Brazil supplied by Ambev.

Another Ambev program is an annual corporate event ("Gente do Bem" – "People Doing Good") that involves the companies' employees as "ambassadors for the prevention cause in-house".

Drinking and driving

Ambev undertook an RDP initiative in 2003 featuring a logo of a boomerang and the campaign slogan, "It is much more fun to go and to return". The same logo and slogan was used for about seven years to communicate activities related to DWI and underage

drinking. Promotions included supply chain communication (POP merchandising and brochures), mass communication (labels, banners and television commercials), and institutional communication (kits and reports).

Ambev has run television commercials with responsible drinking messages since 2000. The company was the first in Brazil to use mass communication to promote responsible drinking to any degree. As Ambev's KI stated:

"We think that advertising is also good for educating".

Another Ambev program, "Amigo da Vez" ("designated friend"), was apparently inspired by a government campaign with the same name that encouraged groups to designate a driver when going out drinking. A print campaign (mass communication) was run during Carnival 2008 in four Brazilian capitals with a contest: "send a picture of you and your designated driver and win a kit".

One component of Ambev's drinking and driving program was the donation of breathalyzers to government agencies. Information was circulated mainly through institutional reports and folders. During the interview, the KI reported a donation of 50,000 digital breathalyzers from the start of the program in 2003 until the beginning of 2008 (increased to 80,000 in 2010), at an individual cost of R\$ 7000.00 (about US\$ 4100 considering US\$1.00 = R\$1.70) each, with a total value of R\$ 350 million (about US\$ 206 million). Unfortunately this information did not check out when, with Ambev's assistance, one of the authors contacted the Ministry of Health and Justice and the Federal Road Department in March/2008. Ministry officials confirmed the donation of breathalyzers, but indicated the instruments were mainly disposable – at a cost of R\$ 15.00 each (about US\$ 9.00) – and could only be used for training because they were not approved by national government institutions for use in surveillance. Why mostly training instruments had been supplied, not the instruments Ambev referred to in interview, is outside the scope of this study.

Diageo inaugurated a designated driver program in 2005 entitled "Piloto da Vez" ("designated pilot"). Besides institutional communication, Diageo also leveraged mass communication around its Johnnie Walker sponsorship of Formula One Team McLaren Mercedes, and brought a Formula One driver ("piloto") to Brazil to help support the program. The slogan for the international campaign that featured driver Mika Hakkinen was "winners always stay in control", which picked up on the role of self-responsibility in the "drink responsibly" approach.

Similarly, Femsa has used a mass communication strategy in its sponsorship of "Pânico na TV" (comedy television program) to target young people. From October 2007 until the beginning of 2008, the company ran two 30-s spots in the program to promote their beer brand "Kaiser" and to support responsible drinking. The responsible drinking commercial showed several pictures and the program host clarified which image "goes well with" or "doesn't fit with" beer. For instance, if a picture of a car was shown, the host said "This doesn't fit with beer"; whereas, if a picture of fried potatoes was shown, the host said "This goes well with beer".

Among national companies, only Schincariol engaged in responsible drinking activities. Using mass communication in an event sponsorship during the 2006 Carnival, Schincariol placed two identical billboards side-by-side with the message: "When you start seeing things in double, do not drive". Additionally in 2006, the company's advertising agency created two responsible drinking commercials.

Underage drinking

In Brazil the legal drinking age is 18 years. In 2003 Ambev launched a campaign called "Peça o RG" ("Ask for the ID") that since

2004 has reached 350,000 sales outlets cumulatively in Brazil (35% of the total POPs reached by Ambev in the country). Other strategies included a campaign with the soccer player Ronaldinho during the 2006 World Cup asking retailers to not sell to minors, and specific campaigns aimed at drinking establishments such as the “Bar de Responsa” (slang for “responsible bar”). Another annual in-house Ambev event targets company employees, “from the CEO to the doormen”, and invites them to visit POPs and check if they are selling to minors. These programs represent institutional communication as well as supply chain communication. As Ambev’s KI stated (about their relationship with vendors):

“My friend, I cannot not sell [alcohol] to you, put you in jail or give you penalties, but I can tell you that selling to minors is not interesting, that in terms of volume sales it represents almost nothing, that [you] can have other products to sell to minors, like sodas”.

As a one-off initiative, Diageo featured “Smirnoff” in a television commercial as part of an underage drinking prevention campaign in 2007. That the commercial was aimed at young people is clear from its language and message: “Drinking too much is going to ruin your party and make you ‘call for UGGO’” (a common expression for “vomiting”).

Measuring results

We were not able to obtain detailed information about RDP evaluation results, but there appeared to be a reluctance to endorse impact measurement. For example, Femsas’s KI advised:

“If anyone tells you there are methods to measure this kind of effort in Brazil it must be a lie”.

Consumer recall methods were used in some cases to assess impact (Femsas and Ambev), but both companies considered the information proprietary, and did not share actual findings. The researchers requested access to impact findings after the interviews, but the requests were declined through email:

“Unfortunately we cannot share [the results] with you. It is an exclusive and strategic methodology from the company” (Ambev’s KI in Feb 22 2008).

“These documents are for internal knowledge” (Femsas’s KI in Feb 25 2008).

Based on the information obtained, it was clear that evaluation was not being uniformly conducted and that none of the companies seemed to be measuring changes in alcohol consumption behavior. Ambev provided a presentation with summary results for consumer favorability research for television spots. Their ads were found by consumers to be “amusing” and “very compelling”. Without additional information, however, it was impossible to tell if the responsible drinking message was taken seriously or was undermined by the ad’s lighthearted character.

Discussion

Among the six alcohol companies, only the transnational firms reported comprehensive RDPs, mostly as part of their global strategies. One explanation for this could be that, despite the voluntary nature of CSR, multinational corporations may be using CSR as an implicit transnational standard and form of self-regulation to offset potential criticism and political interference, whereas the Brazilian companies are not exposed to the same pressures. As had been shown in other contexts, the state of regulatory uncertainty in some countries, the range of social values and expectations, and even the

need to anticipate laws and avoid civil litigation, may be influencing some transnational companies to adopt “highly problem-oriented and practical” internal norms (Dilling, Herberg, & Winter, 2008; Kercher, 2007; Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). Nevertheless, the legitimacy of this approach must be questioned as it raises concerns that rules could be constructed based on self-interest rather than on democratic principles of the ‘greater good’, or scientific evidence for effective policies (Anderson, 2003; Dilling et al., 2008).

Most of the responsible drinking programs in the study were implemented using mass communication (mainly television). Mass media campaigns have the ability to reach a large audience, which is potentially very positive, but industry-led campaigns for responsible drinking are invariably a double-edged sword. Several studies have already reported on the impacts of ambiguous messages (DeJong et al., 1992; Smith, Atkin, & Roznowski, 2006) that seem designed to be richly suggestive and stimulate multiple interpretations by the audience. In this instance, the same messages that promote responsible drinking also promote drinking itself with little or no countervailing argument to ‘not drink’ (Smith et al., 2006). Similarly, although there is as yet insufficient scientific evidence to determine the effectiveness of designated driver programs (Ditter et al., 2005), Diageo’s use of a Formula One driver in its communications in our view confounds rather than supports responsible driving as an antidote to drinking and driving. These programs do not seem to have been designed from a public health perspective (Munro, 2004), and without hard evidence of their efficacy, they appear to be little more than another form of self-promotion (Jernigan, 2009). The net effect is that the epidemiological problems related to alcohol could end up being attributed to those irresponsible individuals who misuse the drug by drinking to excess, drinking and driving, and drinking at too young an age, as well as to the government for failing to curtail these behaviors, while the industry is able to market their products with messages that continue to encourage people to drink (Babor, 2006, 2009; Jernigan, 2009).

The actual impacts of RDPs on behavior are likely insignificant based on the program designs. The number of participating bars in the training programs was very low in comparison to the total number of bars and alcoholic beverage sales locations (0.21% of bars). In addition, actions such as providing training breathalyzers as donations are likely to have only limited effect since they do not help authorities officially diagnose levels of inebriation at roadside.

Although it is quite difficult to define what leads firms to adopt certain CSR activities (Dunfee, 2008), in the case of RDPs, this research suggests that alcohol companies that participated in the study were undertaking limited interventions and not following a public health agenda.

A lasting benefit of the approach they have adopted seems to be that it “kills two birds with one stone” by continuing to promote consumption of their products and brands, while at the same time demonstrating their concern for public health and their ability to self-regulate, which must help to stave off government regulation.

Conclusions

This study had several limitations, including its exploratory design and limited discussion of scientific evidence for how RDP impacts might be evaluated more comprehensively and effectively. Nevertheless, the findings show that, although transnational companies operating in Brazil appear to be concerned with developing responsible drinking initiatives, their program evaluation measures – when they were reported – did not follow accepted standards of evaluating behavior change as an indicator of effectiveness. In sum, their concerns appear to be focused more on offering programs than identifying health outcomes.

We propose two possibilities for a future research agenda for RDPs: 1) randomized clinical control trials of the main alcohol

industry programs, funded by the government and carried out by academic researchers; 2) a cross sectional survey on bars and restaurants to investigate the implementation of the RDPs presented by the industry and their acceptance among staff and owners. It is important that these studies not be funded by the industry, in order to guarantee integrity of data and avoid criticism.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2012.02.062.

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