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Are bottle shops using Twitter to increase advertising or encourage drinking during COVID-19?

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In Australia, the COVID-19 pandemic led to sweeping public health measures to reduce community transmission. These measures included preventing on-site alcohol venues (e.g., bars and pubs) operating during periods of higher community transmission. But, throughout the pandemic, packaged liquor retailers (or ‘bottle shops’) remained open with few restrictions apart from self-imposed purchasing limits to deter ‘panic buying’ and social distancing among customers and staff.

Preliminary reports suggest retailers took advantage of COVID-19 on social media to promote alcohol consumption, with findings indicating that alcohol advertisements were displayed approximately every 35 seconds on Facebook and Instagram during a one-hour period on a Friday night.1,2 The report, however, was limited to examining sponsored advertising posts on Facebook and Instagram via a personal account for a short period. This reduces the generalisability of the report’s findings, as social media activity fluctuates even over single days. Furthermore, while the study focused on sponsored posts, it did not examine non-sponsored posts that appear on liquor retailer social media profiles.

Therefore, to further understand the advertising practices of alcohol retailers during the first COVID-19 lockdown period and to circumvent some of the shortcomings of the prior report, we aimed to examine all posts on an alternative social media platform – Twitter – by packaged liquor retailers in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. We aimed to determine if there was an increased frequency of advertising through non-sponsored posts on this platform compared to previous periods and whether retailers were using COVID-specific alcohol marketing.

Abstract

Objective: Preliminary reports suggested that liquor retailers used COVID-19 to promote alcohol through sponsored posts on Facebook and Instagram. To further understand the advertising practices during this period, we aimed to determine whether packaged liquor retailers increased their posts during COVID-19 or used COVID-19 to promote alcohol on Twitter.

Methods: ‘Tweets’ (Twitter posts) from all packaged liquor retailers in NSW written since 2018 were collected. Tweets written during the first COVID-19 lockdown period were coded for: references of COVID-19, types of marketing message, use of links to online stores and use of an alcohol-related ‘meme’.

Results: There was no evidence of increased tweet frequency, however, some COVID-specific alcohol advertising was detected that leveraged the pandemic (4.0%) or referencing the pandemic without explicitly promoting alcohol (12.0%). The most popular market messages used in the tweets were encouraging alcohol use (15.4%) and easy access to alcohol at home (9.5%).

Conclusions: At least on Twitter, there was no marked increase in posts from packaged liquor retailers in NSW and only some tweets used COVID-19 to promote alcohol.

Implications for public health: The use of COVID-specific alcohol marketing on social media raises important considerations for legislative and regulatory requirements, particularly during major health events such as a pandemic.

Key words: COVID-19, alcohol, packaged liquor retailers, bottle shops, advertising, Twitter

Methods

Packaged liquor retailers were identified from the Liquor and Gaming NSW premises list (April 2020),3 with retailer trade names used to search Twitter for an account. We identified 77 (4.5%) Twitter accounts across 1,724 unique packaged liquor retailers (i.e. a retailer with multiple licences across venues) from the 2,655 retailer licences in NSW. To collect tweets from each retailer’s Twitter account, we used the R package RTweet4 to interact with Twitter’s application programming interface (API).

The frequency of tweets was examined between January to April 2020 and compared to the same period during the preceding two years. Tweets covering the first COVID-19...
lockdown period (13 March 2020 to 30 April 2020) were coded by two researchers (DW and BG). Using the previous reports to guide our coding, the tweets were coded for: a) references to COVID-19; b) the type of marketing message (i.e. saving money, encouraging larger purchases; using the coding scheme from the initial report;2 see Table 1 for an overview of codes); c) whether they included a link to an online store; and d) whether they included an internet ‘meme’ (i.e. a captioned picture or video, often of a humorous nature, that is posted on social media) with alcohol-related content.

Results
At the time of data collection, there were 64,970 followers across the 77 identified Twitter accounts, with a median of 843 (IQR=272.5–2052.5) followers. Descriptive statistics comparing the frequency of packaged liquor retailer tweets showed no discernible increase in the tweets posted between January and April 2020 compared to the same period in the preceding two years (see Figure 1).

COVID-specific messaging and marketing
Of the 749 tweets written during the first lockdown, 44% received at least one like and 18% were retweeted. Of the tweets, we found that only 4% leveraged the pandemic to market alcohol (i.e. “As it is corona time every day now is wnesday, so stay home and get #gettiddelivered”), while 12% referenced the pandemic without explicitly using it to promote alcohol (i.e. “Stay safe everyone. We are open but require masks”). In contrast, 84% of tweets did not reference the COVID-19 pandemic or related terms (e.g. isolation). When analysing all of the tweets between 13 March and 30 April 2020, similar to the previous report,2 we identified tweets that contained messaging such as: easy access to alcohol at home (9.5%); saving money (3.6%); encouraging larger purchases (3.6%); encouraging alcohol consumption (15.4%); and using alcohol to cope, ‘survive’ or feel better (3.3%; see Table 1 for examples). Further, 11.9% of tweets included a link directly to the retailer’s online store, with another 3.1% linking to a similar post on another social media platform (e.g. Instagram) where a link to an online store was provided. Alcohol-related internet memes were also identified, representing nearly 10% (n=72) of all tweets, but were only from three packaged liquor retailer Twitter accounts. Themes identified within the memes included relying on alcohol to cope or survive, linking alcohol to fun or love, and encouraging alcohol consumption, among others.

Discussion
We found that only a small number of packaged liquor retailers had an active Twitter account and, of those who did, there was no evidence of an increase in tweet frequency since the emergence of COVID-19. We did, however, observe some COVID-specific alcohol advertising through Twitter. When analysing the content of tweets written during the first lockdown, we found that the most popular messages used were ‘encouraging alcohol use’ and ‘easy access to alcohol at home’. While similar themes were also the most popular messages used on Facebook and Instagram,2 these themes occurred less often on Twitter. This may indicate that either there is a difference in how retailers use the platforms, or because the initial report only included sponsored content. Indeed, our analysis included all tweets and included messages where Twitter was used to respond and engage with members of the public, which is likely to be different to how retailers use sponsored content.

The focus on all content on a liquor retailer’s social media page may be important, as they may not be strictly considered ‘advertising’. Attempts to promote alcohol consumption or the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism may be particularly damaging as the pandemic, and lockdown orders, have increased social isolation and distress and mental health risk.3,4 Therefore, it should also be considered if such tweets are compliant with relevant legislation, regulations, or industry codes regarding the promotion of liquor (e.g. the NSW Liquor Act 2007). While we are not alleging the tweets reviewed for this study are in breach of any legislation, regulation or industry code, we suggest that greater scrutiny of online advertising and social media posts be considered to ensure compliance, particularly during future instances of lockdown.

Strengths and limitations
A strength of this study was to include all Twitter accounts from packaged liquor retailers in NSW (some of which are major national retailers), rather than examining sponsored advertising posts on a personal social media account. Sponsored advertising on social media often targets individuals based on personal user metrics (i.e. demographics, interests, attitudes, search history), and thus can exclude (or include) specific posts to a user. We also note that as these results are from NSW liquor retailer accounts, they may not be applicable Australia-wide or to other countries. Further, identified strategies and tactics on social media by liquor retailers may have changed since the first wave of the pandemic. Future research should consider using multiple social media platforms via platform...
APIs, including sponsored and non-sponsored content. However, at the time of data collection, access to the Facebook and Instagram APIs were heavily restricted following the Cambridge Analytica data scandal.7

**Conclusion**

Liquor retailers in NSW did not increase advertising through non-sponsored posts on Twitter during the first wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Tweets that leveraged the pandemic to market alcohol, encouraged at-home purchases or increased consumption, and other market messages were detected. However, these tweets occurred less frequently compared to other reports on sponsored social media posts. The emergence of COVID-specific marketing raises important considerations regarding the compliance of sponsored and non-sponsored social media posts in relation to legislative or regulatory requirements and industry compliance codes, particularly during major health events, such as a pandemic.

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