



OPPORTUNITY

1

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## AVAILABILITY AND ADVERTISING: TWIN DRIVERS OF YOUTH BINGE DRINKING IN SOUTH AFRICA

*South Africa's heavy drinking culture is intrinsically linked to how alcohol is marketed and sold. Glamorous marketing campaigns and the wide availability of alcohol mean that young people are susceptible targets. This learning brief explores ways of reducing the negative impact of alcohol on our youth.*

South Africa is particularly attractive to the alcohol industry because of its growing market of young people who make up almost a third of the population (17.84 million young people are between 18- and 34-years-old)<sup>1</sup>. What is more, in South Africa the alcohol industry has excessive freedom to promote alcohol because the industry is expected to self-regulate its advertising practices.

The Control of Marketing of Alcoholic Beverages Bill, placed before Cabinet in 2013, restricts the advertising/marketing of alcoholic beverages except at the point of sale, sponsorship and promotion of alcoholic beverages. The Bill was however stalled indefinitely after the industry “denied evidence of a link between alcohol advertising and consumption, argued that an advertising ban was anti-competitive, that it would

impact the economy, promote trade in illicit liquor, erode personal freedoms, and that the loss of sponsorships would damage the development of arts and sports.”<sup>2</sup> The Bill has had two regulatory-impact assessments and one socio-economic assessment, none of which have been made public and it has still not been passed.

The ban on tobacco advertising serves as a good point of reference. Both alcohol and tobacco have associative harms – and both appeal to the youth through advertising. The tobacco advertising ban coincided with other policy interventions, such as tax increases and public restrictions on smoking in public. As a result, smoking has declined most notably with a 26% reduction in 15- to 16-year olds. The advertising industry and sports sponsorships survived the ban.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stats SA. (2019). SA Population reaches 58.5 million. Access at: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12362>

<sup>2</sup> Matzopoulos. R. (2020). In: Policy Options to Reduce Binge Drinking in South Africa, 37. DG Murray Trust. Access at: <https://dgmt.co.za/alcohol-harms-reduction/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## WHY ALCOHOL ADVERTISING IN SOUTH AFRICA NEEDS BETTER REGULATION

Exposure to alcohol advertising leads to positive attitudes about alcohol use. It works so well that the alcohol industry invests R1.7 billion to R2 billion annually, making up about 4.4% of all advertising in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Significant research has found that alcohol advertising is a predictor of binge drinking; the more adverts that young people watch, the more likely they are to binge drink.<sup>5</sup>

Marketers often try to associate positive emotions or a particular lifestyle with their brands, hoping that this will be reinforced when people think about/use their product. This leads people to adopt a favourite brand which can become an extension of their self-identity, whereby the meanings and values of the brand are adopted by the individual who consumes the brand.<sup>6</sup>

### ALCOHOL ADVERTISING TARGETING YOUNG PEOPLE IS ESPECIALLY PROBLEMATIC

Advertising requires sophisticated decoding or critical reasoning skills to “read” beyond the message being presented by the marketer.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for critical judgements, planning, controlling impulses, decision-making and regulating emotions – is not yet fully developed in children and young people; in fact, it is still under construction until the mid-twenties.<sup>8</sup> That is why young people can become muddled in their perception of the negative impacts of alcohol. After watching alcohol ads, young people expect – consciously or unconsciously – that what they just observed will happen to them after consuming alcohol.

Adolescence is characterised by change and uncertainty. Young people are developing their sense of identity, a key psychological task for this period of development, and they often use symbols as an external expression of their identity. Consuming alcohol might be used as a symbol of rebellion, of their freedom to make choices, of being a risk-taker. The alcohol industry takes advantage of the vulnerabilities of the adolescent period.



Above: In a recent advertising campaign Johnnie Walker ties the achievement of successful young South Africans to their brand.

<sup>4</sup> Kalideen, S. (2018). Outdoor alcohol advertising in Johannesburg residential areas (Doctoral dissertation).

<sup>5</sup> Austin, E. W., Chen, M. J., & Grube, J. W. (2006). How does alcohol advertising influence underage drinking? The role of desirability, identification and scepticism. *Journal of adolescent health, 38*(4), 376-384.

<sup>6</sup> Casswell, S. (2004). Alcohol Brands in young people's everyday lives: New developments in the market. *Alcohol and Alcoholism, 39*(6), 471-476

<sup>7</sup> Lapiere, M. A., Fleming-Milici, F., Rozendaal, E., McAlister, A. R. & Castonguay, J. (2017). The effect of advertising on children and adolescents. *Pediatrics, 140*(Supplement 2), 152-156

Binge and heavy drinking are particularly harmful to adolescent brain development because it affects normal developmental trajectories. As a result, alcohol can have a long-term impact on teenagers' memory and cognitive function.<sup>9</sup> The impacts on the brain can also make drinking in teens more likely to become an addiction, particularly if the drinking starts before 15 years old.<sup>10</sup> The adolescent brain has a higher physical tolerance and stronger reward response to addictive substances. It is highly sensitive to rewards (such as sugar) and to stimulating activities, far more than the adult brain. As mentioned, the ability to inhibit impulses is not yet fully matured, and thus adolescents are more vulnerable to developing a problem with alcohol.<sup>11</sup>

### WHAT CAN YOUTH ORGANISATIONS DO TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE CHALLENGE WHAT THEY HEAR ABOUT ALCOHOL IN THE MEDIA?

**SAHARA** (Smoking & Alcohol Harms Alleviation & Rehabilitation Association) is an organisation that works in communities in George on the Garden Route, helping people to reduce or stop alcohol or substance abuse, and in so doing limit the harm they are doing to themselves, their families and their communities.

SAHARA is pioneering a project aimed at teenagers called Planet Youth. Initiated in 2020, it is working with the Western Cape government to provide local youngsters with recreational activities. Inspired by the success of Planet Youth which was first rolled out in Iceland, it aims to reduce alcohol abuse among teenagers by offering a yearly science-based questionnaire at schools and a variety of after-school activities, as well as psychosocial support and community education. It follows a systemic approach with the encouragement of joint family dinners, organised leisure time activities and parental supervision.

#### The four pillars of the Planet Youth Process are:

- > **Evidence-based practice**
- > **Community-based approach**
- > **Integrating research, policy and practice**
- > **Schools form the hub of interventions and extra-curricular activities.**

The Planet Youth process in Iceland reduced the percentage of teenagers getting drunk from 42% to 5% in 17 years.

8 Youth Health Resource Kit. Access at: <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/kidsfamilies/youth/Documents/youth-health-resource-kit/youth-health-resource-kit-sect-1-chap-1.pdf>

9 DGMT. (2020). Young people open mind. The Human factor, Issue 3. Access at: <https://the-human-factor3.dgmt.co.za/>

10 Teen drinking patterns and how they contribute to addiction. (2020). Fort Behavioural Health. Access at: <https://www.fortbehavioral.com/addiction-recovery-blog/how-teens-become-addicted-to-alcohol/>

11 DGMT. (2020).

12 Weill Cornell Medical College (2008). Learning How To Say 'No' To Alcohol Advertising And Peer Pressure Works For Inner-city Adolescents. Access at: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/02/080229141801.htm>

13 Trangenstein, P. J., Morojele, N. K., Lombard, C., Jernigan, D. H. & Parry, C. D. (2018). Heavy drinking and contextual risk factors among adults in South Africa: findings from the International Alcohol Control study. Substance abuse treatment, prevention, and policy, 13(1), 1-11.

## MEDIA RESILIENCE SKILLS

A three-year study of inner-city students by Weill Cornell Medical College in, New York City in the US found that teens “who can recognise and resist the persuasive tactics used in alcohol ads are less likely to succumb to alcohol advertising and peer pressure to drink”.<sup>12</sup> The study found that seventh graders taught to be more critically aware of advertising, through media resilience skills, were significantly less likely to drink alcohol as ninth graders.

## HOW THE EASY AVAILABILITY OF ALCOHOL HELPS TO GET YOUNG PEOPLE HOOKED

The advertising of alcohol to youth is compounded by its widespread availability. According to a South African study (2018), the availability and affordability of alcohol in communities and close to schools and tertiary institutions, is driving alcohol consumption and binge drinking among young people. The study found that an increasing number of children are having their first drink before turning 13.<sup>13</sup>

Alcohol is commonly sold in unlicensed venues, such as shebeens. These informal venues facilitate availability because they are widely spread and generally disregard legal opening times. For example, there are approximately 25,000 known shebeens in the Western Cape alone, which service every corner in the townships.<sup>14</sup> More than a third (66%) of South Africans drink in shebeens.<sup>15</sup> Another way of making alcohol more accessible is to make it cheaper and selling it in large containers. A 2017 study<sup>16</sup> found that beer is most associated with high rates of binge drinking because it is sold in larger containers and heavily advertised.

The illicit market, which is mostly driven by the smuggling of alcohol, also contributes to cheaply available alcohol. “Illicit alcohol includes counterfeit products, where empty bottles of legitimate brands are refilled with cheaper alcohol, as well as unbranded alcohol, smuggled products and illegal homebrewed alcohol which are sold without paying tax”.<sup>17</sup> The total illicit alcohol market is 14.5% and is valued at about R12.9-billion.<sup>18</sup>

14 Peters, N. C. (2016). Smokkel for the pot: the politics of liquor retail in the Western Cape, a case study of Atlantis (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Western Cape).

15 Trangenstein, P. J., Morojele, N. K., Lombard, C., Jernigan, D. H. & Parry, C. D. (2018). Heavy drinking and contextual risk factors among adults in South Africa: findings from the International Alcohol Control study. Substance abuse treatment, prevention, and policy, 13(1), 1-11.

16 Latagan, B. W., du Preez, R. & Pentz, C. D. (2017). Socio-demographic insights into South African student drinking behaviour. South African Journal of Higher Education, 31(5), 90

17 Mashego, P. (2016). SA's illegal booze market now worth more than R20 billion, study claims. News24. Access at: <https://www.news24.com/fin24/companies/retail/sas-illegal-booze-market-now-worth-more-than-r20-billion-study-claims-20210528>

18 Liedtke, S. (2020). South Africa losing R250m a day because of illicit trade - BLSA. Retrieved from: South Africa losing R250m a day because of illicit trade - BLSA

## THE ON-THE-GROUND IMPACT OF ALCOHOL SALES BANS

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, South Africa has had four complete alcohol sales bans, implemented to relieve pressure on hospitals brought about by alcohol-related emergency incidents. During these periods, there was a dramatic drop in trauma-related incidents. For example, murder fell by 47% in the first four weeks of lockdown compared to the same period in 2019 and by 38% in the second four weeks.<sup>19</sup> Of particular note are the periods during which alcohol sales for home consumption were restricted – Monday to Thursday from 9am-5pm. Maurice Smithers from Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance (SAAPA) attributes the reduction in incidents to the early closure of consumption sites, because much of the violence and trauma associated with alcohol is linked to drinking late into the night, especially over weekends. This decline in alcohol-related incidents highlights how the increased availability of alcohol through longer trading hours contributes to binge drinking.



*“We are not calling for the industry to be closed entirely. But we are saying let’s fight the drinking culture which is causing so many social ills in our communities. This has nothing to do with COVID-19. This has nothing to do with a particular period. This has something to do with what we have experienced before, what we are experiencing now and will be experiencing in the future. Our problem is not a problem that is time bound. It’s a problem that has been there for a long time. We are saying let’s fight it together”*

**Robert Mafinyori,**  
SACBC

Robert Mafinyori is a project manager at the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC), an organisation aiming to reduce alcohol-related harms by having honest, non-judgemental dialogues with individuals, alcohol establishment owners and communities in order to create awareness of alcohol harm, and also to increase awareness of the negative behaviours driven by alcohol consumption, such as gender-based violence. He says another positive outcome from the lockdowns and associated alcohol sale bans were that people could see for the first time that a world without alcohol is possible; that “they can go for days or weeks without alcohol and that they can invest their time well.”

<sup>19</sup> Faull, A., Kelly, J., Diesel, A. (2020). Lockdown lessons: Violence and policing in a pandemic. Access at: <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/sar44.pdf>

## WHAT PROTECTS YOUNG PEOPLE FROM ABUSING ALCOHOL?

And what can youth organisations do to support young people and communities where there is high group pressure to drink and alcohol is always available?



Constructive communication and monitoring by parents.<sup>20,21</sup>



Adolescents with positive family communication and support, good health practices and future aspirations are 1.5 to 2.5 times less likely to use alcohol than those who don’t.<sup>21</sup>



Positive adult and peer role models in their lives.<sup>22</sup>



Religion or feeling connected to a sense of meaning in life.<sup>23</sup>



Leisure activities that reduce boredom, motivate and help develop autonomy, self-identity and self-regulating behaviour.<sup>24</sup>



<sup>20</sup> Beck, K.H., Boyle, J.R. & Boekeloo, B.O. (2003). Parental monitoring and adolescent alcohol risk in a clinic population. *American Journal of Health Behavior* Vol. 27: 108-115.

<sup>21</sup> Hoque, M. & Ghuman, S. (2012).  
<sup>22, 23, 24</sup> Smuts, S. L. (2009).

# BUILDING ON LOCKDOWN LESSONS

About 67% of South Africans won't drink alcohol throughout their entire lives. In contrast, only 12% of adults in the UK will abstain for life.<sup>25</sup> South Africa's COVID-19 lockdowns have offered a number of lessons and opportunities we would be remiss not to build on moving forward. As Smithers from SAAPA argues, "through evidence-based policy options, which include regulating alcohol's availability, reducing alcohol's

affordability, restricting alcohol marketing, having drink-driving countermeasures further tightened up and facilitating access to screening, brief interventions and treatment, the legislation can create a climate where people can say no, we don't want this to go on." Ultimately, we want to end up in a place where people can drink but not in a manner that is a threat to society at large. Restrictions on alcohol are therefore a matter of urgency.

Learning brief by Gugulethu Cebekhulu

25 Vellios, N. G. & Van Walbeek, C. P. (2018). Self-reported alcohol use and binge drinking in South Africa: Evidence from the National Income Dynamics Study, 2014-2015. South African Medical Journal, 108(1), 33-39.

This learning brief is based on a literature review done by Gugulethu Cebekhulu and learning by:



The image contains three logos arranged horizontally. From left to right: the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference logo (a red shield with a white cross and a star), the SAAPA logo (a blue circular graphic with a map of Africa and the text 'Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance SAAPA'), and the SAHARA logo (a blue square with a yellow and orange graphic and the text 'SAHARA SMOKING & ALCOHOL HARMS ALLEVIATION & REHABILITATION ASSOCIATION').



The image shows the DGMT logo, which consists of the letters 'DG' stacked above 'MT' in a white, bold, sans-serif font on a dark olive green square background. Below the logo is the website URL 'WWW.DGMT.CO.ZA' in a white, sans-serif font.