

Why are alcohol companies in our schools?

Jennie Connor

In a recent Viewpoint article,¹ Nicki Jackson and Rachael Dixon examined a high school alcohol education programme called “Smashed” from public health and health education perspectives. It was developed in the UK with the sponsorship of Diageo and is funded in New Zealand by the Tomorrow Project. The article raises two important questions. Why would the alcohol industry want to fund school-based “responsible drinking” education in New Zealand, and why do we give them access to our schools?

Jackson and Dixon’s critique lays out why this initiative will fail to deliver benefit for most students and schools taking part, and may have negative impacts. It is a one-off activity package that is not integrated into, or coordinated with, existing health education or tailored to the students’ needs; a model considered ineffective by existing New Zealand health education guidelines. In addition to the format, there are serious concerns about the content, with its primary focus on “personal responsibility”.

Educational interventions to modify drinking have been extensively researched. Reviews of school-based programmes have failed to find evidence of effectiveness in reducing alcohol consumption or alcohol-related harm with any one-off session.^{2,3} “Smashed” claims to be “dedicated to reducing alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm around the world”,⁴ but evaluations focus only on changes in knowledge, understanding and awareness, which have little or no association with changes in drinking.² Given that benefit to the participants is unlikely, we need to look at the funders to understand why schools have been offered this programme.

Diageo is a major player in the huge global alcohol industry, where worldwide alcohol sales totalled more than 1.5 trillion US dollars in 2017. Diageo is both the leading

spirits company in the world and a ‘Top 10’ beer producer, spending US \$2.5b on advertising in 2017.⁵ As well as traditional advertising they have ample funds for promotion via digital media, sponsorship, product placements and ‘stakeholder marketing’, which is designed to “maintain policy environments conducive to increasing corporate sales and profits”.⁵

And who is the Tomorrow Project? Along with its website, “Cheers”, the Tomorrow Project is an instrument of global alcohol corporations in New Zealand. It is an example of a Social Aspects Organisation,⁵ funded and governed by New Zealand Winegrowers, Spirits NZ and the Brewers Association of New Zealand, many of whose brands are owned by the world’s large alcohol corporations. The Tomorrow Project calls itself a social change initiative, which aims to create “a culture where drinking in moderation is the norm and personal responsibility is inherent.”⁶

However, the alcohol industry worldwide is reliant on the *harmful* use of alcohol. In New Zealand, almost 50% of all alcohol consumed is drunk in heavy drinking occasions,⁷ and so profitability of companies is dependent on high prevalence of heavy drinkers in the population. As heavy drinking adults reduce drinking with age, or die, new heavy drinkers need to be recruited. This is a primary concern of the alcohol industry, and is in direct conflict with the stated aim of the Tomorrow Project.

To maximise consumption you need low prices, high availability, unconstrained promotion and a low purchase age, and so alcohol industries invest heavily in keeping government regulation as light as possible. In the last decade, they have been able to massively expand their marketing reach using the virtually unregulated digital media.⁸

On a much grander scale than Diageo's "Smashed", another alcohol mega-corporation, AB InBev, launched a programme in 2015 that aims to reduce global harmful use of alcohol by 2025 by getting people to make smart choices.⁹ With a budget of a billion dollars, it is still unlikely to be more than a marketing and public relations activity.⁷ A recent systematic review of such corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects concluded "There is no robust evidence that alcohol industry CSR initiatives reduce harmful drinking. There is good evidence, however, that CSR initiatives are used to influence the framing of the nature of alcohol-related issues in line with industry interests".¹⁰

Adolescents and young adults are important to alcohol corporations. They suffer a disproportionate amount of harm from alcohol, which gets attention in the media. While not personally responsible for their lifelong exposure to the physical, social and regulatory environments that drive drinking, they are vulnerable to being depicted as personally irresponsible about their drinking, and therefore in need of "education". However, the industry has a vested interest in young people maintaining and increasing their drinking. A focus on youth drinking also serves the industry by deflecting attention from the high prevalence of heavy drinking in other age groups.¹¹

Alcohol companies and their social aspects organisations consistently oppose strengthening the regulation of alcohol, which would generate wide-ranging benefits, and reduce inequities in health and social outcomes. Such policy measures have been repeatedly shown to be supported by a majority of New Zealanders.^{12,13}

Thus, two reasons for industry funding of this programme emerge. Firstly, it will contribute to some corporate objectives.

Creating an illusion that the industry cares, and is doing something to help, may make it more likely that the industry will be listened to by policy makers and the public. Reinforcing the notion that faulty "personal responsibility" is the real cause of harm from alcohol, allows the industry to argue that healthy alcohol policy such as controls on price, availability and promotion, that would actually reduce drinking and delay drinking initiation among adolescents, is unnecessary. Secondly, it will not reduce consumption.

The question of why alcohol companies have access to our schools is less easily answered.

Trust is placed in schools and teachers that what they provide is reliable and fair. If alcohol companies wanted to help they could offer no-strings-attached funding. After all, teachers are the experts in high school education and they know their students. By offering a ready-made package, the industry retains complete control of the messaging and the format. It brings its own agenda of individual responsibility, ignoring the hazardous nature of its product and its business. This is a marketing device that sells ideas to students, their teachers and their families that are designed to undermine support for effective policy, while enhancing the profile of the industry.

Ironically, while schools are not likely to take money directly from the alcohol industry because it is so clearly wrong, some have accepted the Trojan Horse that "Smashed" represents, and invited the industry in through the front gate. Would they also accept tobacco industry actors coming in to teach their students how to smoke safely? Surely it is time to ban all interaction of the alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food industries with our education system.

Competing interests:

Nil.

Author information:

Jennie Connor, Professor Emerita, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago, Dunedin.

Corresponding author:

Jennie Connor, Professor Emerita, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago, Dunedin.

jennie.connor@otago.ac.nz

URL:

www.nzma.org.nz/journal-articles/why-are-alcohol-companies-in-our-schools

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