Looking into the Glass: Glassware as an Alcohol Marketing Tool, and the Implications for Policy

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Abstract — Aims: To examine how glassware functions as a marketing tool. Methods: Content analysis of trade journals. Results: Glassware is used as an integral part of marketing activity to recruit customers, revive brands, build profits and increase consumption. Conclusion: Glassware should be subject to the same control as other forms of marketing. Glasses could be re-engineered to promote safer drinking.

INTRODUCTION

There is considerable evidence that alcohol marketing is associated with increased likelihood of drinking uptake and progression to heavier drinking (Anderson et al., 2009) and there have been calls for tighter regulation, including a complete ban on all forms of promotion (BMA Board of Science, 2009; University of Stirling, 2013). As well as examining whether alcohol marketing influences drinking, studies have explored how it exerts this influence, through content analyses and investigations into how consumers respond to marketing (Gordon et al., 2010; de Bruijn 2012). Another approach is to examine how marketers themselves discuss their strategies, using evidence ‘from the horse’s mouth’. For example, an analysis of internal alcohol industry marketing documents found that sophisticated appeals to sociability, belonging and masculinity were crafted with the stated aim of recruiting new young customers, increasing consumption and nudging drinkers towards stronger products (Hastings et al., 2010). The findings contributed to the UK Health Select Committee calling for stronger regulation of marketing independent of both the alcohol and advertising industries (House of Commons Health Committee, 2010).

A largely unexamined alcohol marketing tool is the glassware used in licensed premises. By ‘glassware’ and ‘glass’ we mean not the bottles in which alcohol beverages are sold but the tumblers, wine glasses and so on into which alcoholic drinks are poured for serving in licensed premises. These may be branded (as with beer glasses) or unbranded but designed for particular categories of alcohol drink. Little academic attention has been paid to how this branded glassware might function as a means of influencing consumer attitudes and behaviour. This paper uses evidence from the alcohol trade press to examine the marketing intentions underpinning decisions about glass design in the alcohol and hospitality industries, and discusses the implications for policy.

METHODS

A review was conducted of UK periodicals aimed at alcohol retailers, producers and the hospitality sector from 1990 onwards. These typically contain industry news, new product announcements, reports on legislation and opinion pieces. A search for permutations of the terms ‘glass’, ‘size’ and ‘shape’ was run in June–July 2012 in the online versions of the main periodicals (Caterer and Hotelkeeper, The Drinks Report, Harpers, JustDrinks, Off Licence News, The OnTrade Preview and The Publican’s Morning Advertiser), and in Nexis UK, a subscription database including hospitality, food and beverage and manufacturing journals. In total 391 articles were found, of which 63 met the study criteria and were included. Article content was coded thematically in relation to the glass feature being discussed (e.g. size, shape, design) and the marketing function or aim (e.g. to boost sales, revive brand interest, recruit new segments), and the findings presented in a narrative synthesis structured around key themes.

INCREASING THE PLEASURE OF DRINKING

The articles demonstrate that the glass’s potential to enhance the drinking experience is increasingly being appreciated: ‘Glassware is a much-overlooked feature within the trade and is becoming increasingly important as a marketing tool’ (McFarland, 2002). The use of bespoke glassware for a particular brand is seen as a way of ensuring consistency of presentation across outlets, increasing loyalty among current customers and boosting trial among non-customers (Publican’s Morning Advertiser, 1999). Comparisons are made with continental beer-producing countries, where distinctive glassware for each beer brand ‘is considered an integral part of the pomp and ceremony’ of beer drinking (McFarland, 2002). Unlike other forms of marketing, the glass enjoys close proximity to the drinker, ensuring that ‘the branding [on the glass] is there from the moment of dispense to the last mouthful’ (McFarland, 2002). The articles demonstrate a growing interest in the ‘science’ of glassware, with several citing experiments that claim to demonstrate how different glass shapes and sizes and even the thickness and angle of the rim affect wine aroma and taste (e.g. Delwiche and Pelchat, 2002; Hummel et al., 2003). Innovations to increase tactile pleasure are described, such as a Heineken glass with ‘an embossed curve on the side, adding a pleasant feeling when held’ (Murray, 2011) and a highball glass with an indentation of ‘five lines representing the five aspects of the perfect serve: spirit, mixer, glass, ice and garnish’, because ‘men like to have something to play with while holding a drink’ (Cran, 2006).

SEX APPEAL

In 2009, an initiative by ‘The BitterSweet Partnership’, created to ‘get more women into beer’, worked with glass designers to create beer glasses that would appeal to a female audience...
Particular attention is paid to the size of the glass and how this profit margins, because 37% of customers would be prepared new branded glassware can not only increase sales but also increased sales by 9.7% year on year (McFarland, 2002). Continuing this theme, Heineken UK argued that the industry needed to provide women with drinks that are ‘well-presented, stylish and elegant’, because ‘the way a drink looks is an important part of how a drink makes a woman feel’ (McLelland, 2010).

In 2010, Woodpecker cider launched ‘an elegant new glass to appeal to the 60% of Woodpecker fans who are female’ (Black, 2010). Similarly, in 2006, Diageo launched a new male-targeted 16 fl oz (455 ml) spirits and mixer glass, designed for ‘a larger spirits measure and longer drink’, following research which claimed that the highball glass typically used for spirits and mixers was ‘too feminine’ for male drinkers (Cran, 2006).

**DRIVING SALES**

Several articles claim that changes in glassware can drive up sales, by reviving interest in a brand among existing customers or by recruiting new customers (Lewis, 2010b). The introduction in 2002 of Stella Artois branded glassware into 8,000 UK pubs was claimed by its then producer Interbrew UK to have increased sales by 9.7% year on year (McFarland, 2002). A new design of chalice glass in 2009 to complement the launch of ‘Stella Artois 4%’ was associated with a claimed 14% increase in sales compared with outlets which used older glasses (Lewis, 2009; Turney, 2009). Some articles claim that new branded glassware can not only increase sales but also profit margins, because 37% of customers would be prepared ‘to pay more for a pint in a branded glass’ (Footit, 2010).

**SIZE MATTERS**

Particular attention is paid to the size of the glass and how this can best be manipulated to increase sales. Several articles discuss a move towards ‘over-sized’ (more than a pint) beer glassware to allow beer to be served with a continental sized large head (Publican’s Morning Advertiser, 2003, 2005; Ridout, 2008). A two-thirds of a pint ‘schooner’ glass was introduced in 2011 with the hope that it would ‘help revive sales of alcohol, which fell by 13% in 2010’ (Frewin, 2011), and enable licensees ‘to cash in on the excitement and interest that the new serving size can bring to the beer category’ (Gerrard, 2012).

Since 1995, the legally permitted measure sizes for wine by the glass in the UK have been 125 ml, 175 ml and multiples thereof [prior to this, no measure size was stipulated, but the 125 ml ‘Paris goblet’ tended to be the most used in licensed premises (Caterer and Hotelkeeper, 2000)]. In 1996, a spokesman from Carlsberg-Tetley brands urged licensees to call 175 ml a ‘standard’ glass and 125 ml ‘small’ and noted that: ‘You would think I was pretty tight if I offered you a small glass of wine, wouldn’t you?’ (Caterer and Hotelkeeper, 1996). Similarly, in 2001, licensees were advised that ‘The basic step is to move from 125 ml glasses to 175 ml. Greene King saw wine sales increase by 20 per cent in six weeks after it cleared all the 125 ml glasses out of its tenanted estate…With 175 ml as the standard and 250 ml as the large size, pubs increase both volumes and profits’ (Publican’s Morning Advertiser, 2001). A 2004 article declares that small glasses ‘give the impression that the pub doesn’t take wine seriously,’ and that ‘getting customers to ‘go large’ in glass size not only improves the experience, it’s also a tremendously efficient way of cranking up profit …[which] could potentially add thousands onto the bottom line’ (McFarland, 2004). In the same year, articles quote a survey claiming that use of the 125 ml glass had dropped to 4% in pubs, and that usage of the 250 ml glass in hotels had doubled (Caterer and Hotelkeeper, 2004). However, later figures in 2008 suggested that the 125 ml glass was still dominant in sports and social clubs (54.5% of wine sales) (Wilmore, 2008), and one 2010 article predicted a return to 125 ml as the standard measure size in line with tougher government action on responsible drinking (Lane, 2010).

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings suggest that, far from being merely a functional vessel, the glass has come to be an integral part of marketing activity. The role of the glass as a marketing tool has been hinted at in previous research—a previous analysis of alcohol marketing strategies (Hastings et al., 2010) noted that Smirnoff recommended ‘chunky glassware’ as a means of implying greater alcoholic potency—but this is the first time the glass has been examined in detail from a critical marketing perspective. Like a cigarette, the glass is a particularly intimate form of marketing because it is held in the hand and is integral to the moment of consumption (Ford et al., 2013). The study shows that the glass is used as a means of communicating brand values and enhancing the drinking experience, recruiting new segments to a particular drink category, reviving interest in a brand, complementing the launch of new products and building market share.

The industry sources quoted in the paper suggest that producers and licensees clearly regard the glass as capable of affecting consumers’ attitudes and influencing them to drink and spend more. Evidence from experimental studies on glass size and shape confirm that these can affect perceptions and behaviour (White et al., 2003; Wansink and van Ittersum, 2005; Attwood et al., 2012). A consistent theme in these studies is that consumers are often unable accurately to assess how much alcohol a glass contains or to pour a given measure correctly, with certain types of glass size and shape causing particular uncertainty. For example, Attwood et al. (2012) found that participants underestimated the true half-way point of a curved glass to a greater degree than that of a straight glass, while Wansink and van Ittersum (2005) noted that both students and experienced bartenders poured more alcohol into short wide glasses than into tall slender glasses when asked to pour a standard measure. Inability to distinguish volume may encourage over-consumption; one study found that alcoholic drinks were consumed 60% more quickly from a curved than from a straight glass (Attwood et al., 2012).

Several areas of action are suggested by this study. From a public health policy perspective, it is clear that the glass is as much a part of the marketing mix for alcohol as advertising, sponsorship, packaging and product design, and should be subject to the same scrutiny and control. At a time when alcohol suppliers’ involvement in public health is highly
contested (e.g. Gillan, 2013; Gornall, 2013), this may be an area where responsible publicans could play a legitimate role. One obvious step would be for licensees and producers to adopt and promote smaller measures. The Public Health Responsibility Deal in England includes suggestions that on-trade premises reduce the normal measure in some categories: for example, for wine ‘make 175 ml glasses the default serving size and increase use of the 125 ml serving’ (Department of Health, 2013). These recommendations could go further. A behavioural economics experiment demonstrated that, in a menu with three drink options, removing the smallest size led to ~25% of consumers who had previously picked the middle size switching to the largest because they were reluctant to choose the smallest available option (Sharpe et al., 2008). This suggests that wine glass size norms could be shifted downwards from the more popular 175 ml and 250 ml measures by increasing options at the smaller end of the range, such that 125 ml is no longer the smallest, and therefore undesirable, choice.

Sobal and Wansink (2007), discussing environmental influences on diet, suggest that mundane features such as plateware exert an ‘often unconscious influence on food choices’ and propose that positive ‘re-engineering’ of these environmental cues could help encourage healthier diets. Glasses could be similarly re-engineered: the same kind of attention which is currently lavished on the presentation of alcoholic drinks could be paid to non-alcoholic drinks served in licensed premises, so that they too are offered in attractive branded glasses which make consumers ‘feel better about their choice of drink’. At the same time, glassware for alcohol could be re-designed to encourage safer drinking, for example by deploying shapes that convey a more accurate impression of volume, or by adding marks to indicate units of alcohol, as has been recently implemented by Heineken (Heineken UK, 2013); however, the possibility that unit marks may in some cases encourage consumption would need to be thoroughly investigated before recommending this for widescale adoption. It has been shown that a ban on traditional glassware in nightclubs can reduce injuries from alcohol-related disorder (Forsyth, 2008). This suggests that wine glass size norms could be shifted downwards from the more popular 175 ml and 250 ml measures by increasing options at the smaller end of the range, such that 125 ml is no longer the smallest, and therefore undesirable, choice.


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