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Booze lobby arguments befuddled, incoherent

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The liquor industry has lobbyists with deep pockets and they account for a big chunk of media house revenues, writes Anthony Butler

WE ALL know alcohol use is responsible for preventable diseases, impaired child development, suicides and road deaths. Two-thirds of social contact crimes, such as murder, rape and assault, are linked to alcohol or drug abuse. Social Development Minister Bathabile Dlamini this week estimated the tangible cost at R38bn per year, with intangible costs possibly reaching R240bn.

World Health Organisation guidelines propose that governments reduce alcohol affordability, curtail availability, enforce minimum age limits, and reduce public exposure to alcohol marketing. But alcohol policy is hard to get right. The police use liquor laws mostly to extract bribes from shebeen owners. Finance ministers use "sin taxes" to plug budget deficits. Higher prices and the tighter regulation of legitimate outlets drive alcohol underground.

The industry has lobbyists with deep pockets. Drink companies sponsor national sports teams, which brings them allies in the government and positive citizen recognition. They account for a big chunk of media house revenues: Times Media Group, owner of Business Day, earns R30m a year from drink adverts.

The departments of social development and health have boldly drafted legislation to ban alcohol advertising and sponsorships. The industry's response to the Control of Marketing of Alcohol Beverages Bill has been robust but unpersuasive. The Industry Association for Responsible Alcohol Use has advanced four apparently contradictory claims in a long-winded and obfuscatory paper.

First, it argues that "the balance of the evidence ... does not support a direct causal relationship between overall alcohol marketing and drinking levels". The purpose of advertising "is not necessarily to increase total consumption" but rather to "increase brand awareness" and "encourage consumers to switch to their brand". A paper by Charles Parry and others in last year's South African Medical Journal, by contrast, persuasively argues that advertising does indeed have a positive effect on consumption and that "a total ban results in reduced consumption".

Second, the industry claims that an advertising ban will create economic havoc. "Overall", it states, "548,000 employment opportunities can be directly or indirectly traced back to the production and sale of liquor". But, if advertising does not affect consumption, as the Association for Responsible Alcohol Use itself claims, surely few of these jobs will be at risk?

Third, drink campaigners argue an advertising ban will erode cultural or human freedoms. Yet most South Africans are morally and culturally averse to drink, with half of all men never having drunk alcohol and more than eight in 10 women not in the past year. There is no proposal to end ready availability.

Fourth, echoing tobacco industry arguments from a decade ago, the booze lobby says sports will collapse without alcohol sponsors. In reality, a space for new, and more benign, sponsors will grow, breaking the spurious link between drink, the youth, and sport.

This policy shift is primarily about the next generation. Writing in the South African Medical Journal last year, Leane Ramsoomar and Neo Morojele argued that South Africa's youth are being "targeted by an alcohol industry determined to explore a previously untapped market", using "overt" marketing such as "the promotion of alcoholic beverages at sporting events" as well as "subliminal" approaches. Parry and his colleagues detail international studies that establish how alcohol advertising "influences young people's behaviour, normalises drinking in many different settings, brings about positive beliefs about drinking, and encourages (them) to drink alcohol sooner and in greater quantities". One five-country study cited by Parry shows that youngsters aged between 13 and 17 were "expressly targeted by alcohol advertisers". Leaked UK alcohol industry documents reveal some companies' determination to recruit new cohorts of drinkers, and detail their use of market research data on 15- and 16-year-olds in the development of their marketing campaigns.

We are indeed fortunate not to have such predatory alcohol companies here.

- *Butler teaches politics at the University of Cape Town.*

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