

Alcohol labelling policies to protect young people
FOCUS GROUPS REPORT
ROMANIA

Objective

The objective of the study was to determine perceptions regarding labelling of alcoholic beverages and the influence on the drinking behaviour of Romanian consumers from 18 to 25 years old.

Recruiting and building the focus groups

The focus-groups were organized on 22nd and 23rd February 2010.

Group 1 - 18-21 years old

- 11 people, 7 female, 4 male
- students, workers , unemployed

Group 2 - 22-25 years old

- 8 people, 4 female, 4 male
- students, workers , unemployed

Alcohol experience

The word “alcohol“ was associated by both groups more to ideas that have a negative connotation - “accidents, alcoholic coma, hangover, drunkenness, danger, violence, lost next day, excess, spent money, hospital, fight“, than a positive one - “youngsters, friendship, band, communication, joy, party, happiness, entertainment“.

The first experience with alcohol for all participants was before they were 18 years old. There were two situations: first one, when they used to taste alcoholic drinks from their parents (beer, wine), when they were children; second one, when they drank on purpose, around the age of 14-15 and it mostly happened at parties. They tried it because of curiosity, for trying something new, because their friends were drinking.

D., student, 20, F – “I first drank at a party, when I was 15 ... it was for fun, entertainment, I wanted to try something new”.

M., student, 22, M – “When I was a child I used to taste alcohol from my parents’ or guests’ glasses”

There were some participants who never got drunk, but for the others the first drunkenness happened usually when they were in high-school at parties or birthday parties.

G., unemployed, 24, F – “I first got drunk at my birthday party when I turned 19, I mixed wine and beer and something else that I don’t remember so I got drunk”

The frequency of alcohol consumption depends on the time of the year. Boys usually drink more often than girls. Some use to drink several times a week, some 3-4 times a month. Boys prefer beer or wine, while girls prefer wine or other sweet drinks such as vodka with different juices.

O., student, 22, M – “once, twice a week, beer”
M., student, 22, M – “once a week, a beer or two, or wine”
L., student, 23, F – “I drink wine, or vodka with some sweet juice”

For participants “too much” when drinking means: “to drink until you fall down”, “to drink in excess, to get sick from drinking”, “not to remember what you did last evening”, “when your senses are affected”, “when you pass your limits, when you are no more conscious of what you are doing”, “depends of the alcohol contained in the drink”.

Both groups mentioned that there are differences between alcohols, depending on the alcohol content in a drink: “spirits are stronger and if you drink more you get drunk easily”, “spirits are more dangerous and if you drink a lot the consequences are others”.

Choice of the alcohol

Drinks are mainly bought from supermarkets, from bars and clubs; some also drink home made drinks (received from relatives from the countryside).

The following types of drinks were presented:
Red wine, bottled beer, canned beer

The participants have chosen a certain drink from the ones presented. The main criteria for choosing one drink or another was the type of drink. One person did not prefer any of the drinks presented, but instead preferred whiskey.

A., student, 20 years old, F: “I don’t enjoy any of these drinks, I’d rather drink some whiskey, I like pure alcohol taste”.

An idea associated to wine consumption was that a glass of wine drunk daily is good for health, and even the doctor recommends it.

G., unemployed, 24 years old, F – “The doctor recommends one glass of wine daily, it is good for circulation”.

When asked to tell what they know about the drink chosen:

- in the case of wine: they mentioned classification, foods to be served with, year of production, its origin
- in the case of beer: ingredients, it is a “light” drink, does not have a high level of alcohol

Two persons switched from drinking beer to wine as they had some problems with tolerating the excessive consumption of the first one.

One person mentioned to be drinking wine because it looks to her more appropriate to a girl.

It is surprising that, from the consumers’ point of view, only one person in each group mentioned that they check the validity term of a drink.

Consumer information campaign: knowledge and reactions

A number of campaigns were mentioned:

- the TV campaign – the message shown on TV more times a day saying “Alcohol consumption is harmful to your health”, but due to the fact it is shown too many times a day, it does not have an impact anymore, people tend to ignore it.
- the campaign developed by traffic police for drivers’ information

It depends on every person how much they want to be informed.

A campaign which says “don’t do, don’t drink” it is not effective, a more effective one is one in which a story is presented.

The participants also chose to be informed by means of posters, because they don’t watch TV so much.

The education, the fact that parents stressed out very clearly to their children that alcohol is not good, had an influence on children’s behaviour and they became more conscious on alcohol effects.

A method of information campaign over the risks related to excessive alcohol consumption was that of presenting on TV some short movies with happenings due to alcohol consumption.

The risks associated to drunkenness were: car accidents, a person got drowned into the sea because he was too drunk, domestic violence, liver disease, cirrhosis, harmful for unborn child, different crimes, harmful to brain “it destroys neurons”.

How to perform good information? Expectations, reactions to current labels, standard drinks

The participants aged 22-25 years old mentioned that campaigns that say “do not do that or that” are not efficient. Some other type of messages should be tried.

C., student, 22, M – “I would like to know more about the diseases involved by alcohol consumption”.

It was suggested that maybe it is good for parents to allow children to taste a little bit of alcohol, because this may prevent latter from being tempted to drink high quantities of alcohol just out of curiosity.

The girls from the group age 18-21 years old mentioned that they would like to know more on the effects of alcohol on pregnant women and their unborn child.

Other information to be known:

- the number and quantity of preservatives, or other ingredients
- to be specified the number of people who died because of alcohol consumption or different pictures that present different accidents caused by alcohol consumption
- messages like: “be responsible for the quantity you drink” seems enough

Information to be added on the label:

- caloric content

- more explanations on the alcohol content

Other information that was suggested to be presented on a label:

- the alcohol content
- the sign for recycling package
- type of drink
- validity
- recommendation for consumption

The labels presented:

For wine: the type of wine, year of production, it's on promotion, it's certified, foods to be served with, it contains sulphites, quantity, validity term, it is premium quality, the design is too heavy.

For beer: the quantity, the alcohol volume, ingredients, its logo "fresh and strong really manly" (a girl mentioned "if you are a woman don't try it"), responsible consumption is recommended.

The participants approved that it is good to have the energetic value mentioned on the label, because most women are interested on the caloric content, otherwise the label contains all the necessary information. They mentioned that it is nothing new to be learned.

They check the alcohol content, but mostly for beer, for wine it is not considered so important.

The information on the label does influence them when they first buy a drink, after you taste it, you decide if they will buy it again.

V., student, 23, F – "the alcohol content does influence me when I buy a drink, if I buy beer I'll buy more because the alcohol content is lower, while if I buy some strong spirits, the alcohol content is higher so I'll buy less"

The standard drink label was seen as very interesting and would be very useful if having it on labels.

How to perform good information? Reactions to new warning labels

The prevention campaign against tobacco with the different messages and images was not so efficient.

Both groups said that most smokers ignore the messages and if they really want to smoke they will still do it no matter what the risks are. They find many ways to hide the pictures from their (e.g. to put a piece of paper on the package to hide it). There were some effects, but on short term

V., student, 23, F - "My boyfriend delayed the smoking of a cigarette after he saw an ugly image on the pack of cigarettes"

Messages are ok but people tend to ignore them, convincing themselves that such a bad thing could not happen to them.

For the logos: the most appreciated were the pictograms with pregnant woman, medicines and the drunken man.
For the pregnant woman the interpretation "access denied ...it is hurting your unborn child."

The other 3 images and messages were not considered to have such a big visual impact; the image does not correlate so much with the message.

The medicines logo:

"it is relevant ...it reminds persons who take medicines not to drink because this might have reversed effects"

Alcohol increases the risk of violence: "the image is not so suggestive, although the red wine could be the symbol of blood"

The images + messages

The images of lungs – the image is not credible, "you don't think you can get cancer cirrhosis unless you know some person who was ill"

The man: "it is suggestive; it would have a great impact"

The fist "more suggestive for expressing violence"

Warning: "it is good that the age limit is suggested because this is the target group in clubs"

Health warning: "the message is ok, but the image is fade"

The disabled baby "it is a too hard, does not look real"

The following suggestions were made regarding the pictures or images that would be put on the label of alcoholic drinks:

There are soft and hard images, they would prefer hard images, but not too hard.

On the other hand, the images should be comic.

Messages should be accompanied by images, because "the image might make you read the message"

Message positioning

If it is included on the label it would be small in size and unobservable, so it should be bigger so it can be readable. It could be put on the side or on the neck of the bottle. For wine it could be put on the label attached to the neck of the bottle.

The colours are important. It should be in vivid colours like orange, red or to have a good contrast yellow on a black background.

Positioning should be different depending on the type of drink. Some drinks might have the message on some kind of ring attached to the bottle.

The pictograms, like the ones with medicines or drunken person could be also put on the restaurants menus in the Alcoholic Drinks Section. Campaigns' posters in bars, clubs are also good.

It would be well positioned on the front of the bottle, but as well near the validity term, because it might be more easily observable.

Workshop on proposal of an advertisement label:

The participants aged 18-22 years old designed a label for beer: on the front, on the neck of the bottle a message such as: "Alcohol is harmful to your health. Take care of you", "Be responsible. Drink with measure" or "Don't drink when driving or Don't drink and drive"

Other suggestion was a pictogram with a banned car, meaning "Don't drink and drive" and the one with the pregnant woman and the message "Excessive alcohol consumption is very bad to your health".

The participants aged 23-25 years designed a label for wine: on the neck, on the front of the bottle the message "Alcohol is very bad to your health", coloured white on black background; on the back of the bottle should be put a mix of pictograms (like the pregnant woman and the medicines)

Other suggestion was on front, the producers' label and on the back the message written in yellow on a black background "Alcohol ruins/destroys your life" and a cross with the message "What is your name?" and at the bottom of the bottle an image of an accident with the message "1 in 4 of all road deaths involve alcohol".

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

There were not any notable differences between the groups.

Both groups considered the standard drink concept on a label to be very interesting and would be very useful if having it on labels. Romanian drinks do not contain the standard drink on the label.

A good label would have the following characteristics:

- readable, with vivid colours in good contrast to the background
- pictures shown should be realistic
- it can suggest a humoristic approach
- message should be accompanied by picture
- it should be put on front as well on the back of the bottle
- its positioning depends on the type of the drink

The pictograms with the pregnant woman and the drunken man were most appreciated.