Reviewer's report

Title: Marketing messages accompanying online selling of low/er and regular strength wine and beer products in the UK: A content analysis

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Reviewer: David Foxcroft

Reviewer's report:

This is a novel and well written study that deserves publication. It makes a useful contribution to our understanding of the issues surrounding the reduction of alcohol content (%ABV) as a public health strategy when the alcohol industry has a relatively free hand in the planning and implementation of this strategy. This study that looks at the differences in online marketing messages between low(er) strength beer and wine and regular strength beer and wine, on the webpages of the four main supermarkets in the UK. Reducing the strength of alcohol is a topical public health issue, which has been included in recent Government strategy. Reducing the strength of alcohol may lead to a reduction in alcohol consumption and harms but only if consumers replace regular strength alcohol with low(er) strength alcohol and drink an equal, or fewer, number of low(er) strength drinks. Marketing messages influence consumer behaviour and it is therefore important to understand whether the alcohol industry are marketing low(er) strength alcohol as a replacement, or an addition, to regular strength alcohol. There are some major, and several minor, suggestions for improving the paper:

1. The analysis and discussion highlights that low/er strength alcohol products are more likely to be marketed with a positive health framing, and there is a suggestion in the paper that this is undesirable. This thinking behind this needs to be clarified and set out in some detail. Surely the point of lower strength alcohol is that it reduces harms, and therefore a positive health framing is entirely consistent with the aim of the strategy. Why this might be undesirable needs to be pointed out, and clearly justified.

2. The alcohol industry (and marketing of products) are regarded as a single, uniform, entity. Though it may be beyond the scope of the current study, it may be worth looking at, or reflecting on, the point that the alcohol industry may be quite diverse in it's marketing approach with regard to low/er strength products. For example, some companies have well developed and clear "smarter drinking" goals. It would be illuminating to see if such companies are more responsible in their marketing, consistent with their goals, and could be pointed up as role models within the industry. Or perhaps there is an inconsistency between such responsible drinking goals and alcohol marketing approaches withing the same company: it could be important to point out any such contradictions.
3. The number of statistical tests is troubling, and runs the risk of a substantial number of false positives. There is a strong hint of presentation bias in the results because of this. Much more attention should be given to dealing with this issue, both from a statistical and a descriptive perspective. For instance, the results should be described in full, not just those where a conventionally significant statistical effect was found.

Minor points:

* It would be helpful to add a description of the study design to the title of the article

* P3, 9: "The cost of alcohol related harms in England has been estimated at £21 billion a year." Reference to GOV.UK does not support this. £21b is the cost to UK society: see The Government's Alcohol Strategy (2012) p3.

P3, 12-14: "One way of reducing consumption and associated harms is the development, promotion and marketing of low/er alcohol products." There are no references to evidence that supports this claim. The given reference provides estimations only.

* The study uses low minimum thresholds for regular strength alcohol: beer >2.8% ABV and wine >8.5% ABV. Alcohol products of these strengths would normally be classified as reduced strength and may, therefore, be marketed in a manner similar to low(er) strength alcohol. The classification system used in the study may result in the true differences in marketing messages being masked. Therefore, the results may be regarded as conservative.

* P9, 43-46: "...'millenials' who now form a large portion of the drinks market". The reference given does not support this claim.

* It may be of benefit to the reader if beer were further defined as this is an umbrella term for ale, lager, craft etc., which have different average strengths and are marketed in different ways.

* Table 1 displays sampling messages for low(er) and regular strength alcohol products. It may be easier to understand if these were colour-coded (as Figure 1) or displayed as two separate tables.

* Typo on Figure 1: Imteraction rather than interaction.
* The study only coded low(er) alcohol products that are marketed on webpages, thus failing to account for marketing messages that may differ on other platforms such as billboards and on social media; this should be mentioned as a limitation.

* P8, 31-33: Readers are signposted to Figures S1 and S2 in Online Supplementary Materials for examples of products containing images of %ABV and descriptors such as "light" and "lower". S2 does not give examples of this, but gives examples of marketing using images of fruit. This could be explained in the body of the text prior to signposting readers to S2.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

Does the work include the necessary controls?
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Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
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