

Alcohol industry, corporate social responsibility and country features in Latin America

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Abstract

Introduction and Aims. Research on corporate behaviour can contribute to the understanding of the possible adverse impacts of alcohol-industry corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and their potential influence on policymaking. This study explores the association between alcohol-industry CSR activities and selected country features in Latin America and the Caribbean. **Design and Methods.** Nine health experts evaluated 148 CSR activities using a standardised protocol; activities were classified into the categories risk management CSR (rmCSR), that is, to avoid/rectify externalities (n = 67), and strategic CSR, that is, to fulfill philanthropic responsibilities (n = 81). We evaluated the associations, separately, between the number of rmCSR and of strategic CSR actions in each country with threats from public health measures (specifically, the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms, the existence of an alcohol surveillance system and the number of governmental alcohol policy actions) and per capita alcohol consumption; we adjusted by economic indices (country income level and the gross domestic product) and population size. **Results.** Multivariate analyses showed that the higher the level of alcohol research within a country and its per capita consumption, the more likely rmSCR activities were to occur, independently of the country's economic development or population. **Discussion and Conclusions.** Results suggest rmSCR actions could be implemented as a way to preserve markets by counteracting scientific evidence about alcohol related harms. This evidence could serve as a starting point to future research, contributing to the understanding of alcohol industry behaviour and the advancement of effective public policies. [Conde K, Peltzer R, Pantani D, Pinsky I, Cremonte M. Alcohol industry, corporate social responsibility and country features in Latin America. *Drug Alcohol Rev* 2021;40:423–430]

Key words: alcoholic beverage, corporate social responsibility, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Introduction

The impact of alcohol industry practices in the burden of alcohol-related harms is well-described in the literature [1,2], as well as their tactics to shape alcohol problems in accordance to their own interests [3] and to interfere in the development and implementation of alcohol control measures [4]. For the last two decades, alcohol companies have conducted corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities ranging from marketing self-regulation [5–7] to responsible drinking messages. If, on the one hand, CSR have been found to be part of the alcohol industry global strategy to deal with their products' social, health, economic and environmental externalities [8], on the other, there is evidence of its lack of effectiveness in controlling

alcohol-related problems [9]; its attempts to influence research and public policies in the alcohol field [10–12]; and to focus on personal responsibility rather than on the product itself (alcoholic beverages), shifting the focus away from consumption as a public health issue [13].

Similar efforts to prevent the implementation of effective public health measures by other unhealthy commodities companies, such as tobacco and highly processed food, have been extensively documented [14,15], but more research on the alcohol industry's behaviour should be conducted [16], especially at country and regional levels [7,17,18]. In Latin America, alcohol use is one of the main risk factors to disability adjusted life years lost [19] and it is projected to increase until 2025 [19]. There, a study showed that alcohol industry's CSR in

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the region are likely to promote alcohol brands and products, including to young people [20].

In order to theoretically explain the development and implementation of the alcohol industry's CSR, some authors have suggested the influence of environmental factors, including: (i) cultural issues [18], based on the idea that companies should respond to social pressure and present a certain level of accountability to society [19]; (ii) economic status, which relates to profit and to the availability of money and other resources to invest in the CSR strategy [20]; and (iii) level of development, representing the political and social context within the country or region where the corporation will implement the strategy, for instance, low regulatory frameworks may result in less governmental attention and more room for private actors to operate discretionally [21,22]. Those studies, however, have mostly focused on the characteristics of the activities per se, and not on how countries' differential contextual aspects relate to the industry's CSR activities.

In the current study, we explore the association between theoretically-relevant country features and CSR activities performed by alcohol companies in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region with high per capita alcohol consumption and increasing levels of alcohol-related harm [23]. First, we explore the association between the number and type of CSR activities and: (i) potential threats to the industry from public health measures (the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms, the existence of a surveillance system and policy actions); (ii) per capita consumption; (iii) economic indices, such as country income level and gross domestic product (GDP); and (iv) population size. We hypothesized that the greater the threats from public health measures and per capita alcohol consumption, the more CSR actions would be conducted as a way to increase sales rather than to benefit society, independent of the country's industry development level and potential market size (i.e. economic and population characteristics).

Methods

Sampling

Nine health experts [see 21 for more details] from three different countries (Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay) evaluated the 215 activities listed in the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking (IARD) online database for the Latin American and Caribbean region (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela). The IARD database was part of a commitment

issued in 2012 by 11 major global producers and two major trade associations of alcoholic beverages to reduce harmful drinking. The database had been posted before at initiatives.global-actions.org, and it is an example of how the industry attempted to demonstrate their steps towards meeting this commitment and supporting the World Health Organization (WHO)'s Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol [9]. We chose all activities that took place during a 10 year period, from 2004 to 2014. In 2016, after data collection, the website that hosted the data on activities was shut down.

Using a standardised protocol [20], which included categories and their descriptions and examples, coding practice sessions were performed by the raters with CSR actions from other regions until an adequate inter agreement measure was reached [9]. Raters coded the 168 activities occurring during the selected time frame into three categories. The categories were based on the assumption that there are mainly three types of CSR that companies can perform: altruistic CSR, which refers to actions that could contribute to the common good and not solely to the business growth—sometimes it could even be conducted at the expense of the company and its profits; ethical or risk management CSR, which indicates the industry responsibility to avoid or rectify harms caused by its externalities; and strategic CSR, which is carried out to achieve fulfillment or philanthropic responsibilities that create a benefit both to the corporation and to other groups of society—'a win-win' situation [24].

Only four activities were classified as altruistic CSR. Since this type of initiative (e.g. donation of food and clothes after a hurricane) would not relate to the reduction of harmful drinking, they were excluded from the sample. The remaining activities were classified either under risk management CSR (rmCSR) or strategic CSR (sCSR). The final sample comprised 148 activities (rmCSR: $n = 67$ and sCSR: $n = 81$). Figure 1 shows the sampling scheme.

Country features: threats from public health measures, alcohol consumption, economic indices and population

The following characteristics were assessed for each country in the Latin American and Caribbean region, also from the same time period as the CSR activities, that is, 2004 to 2014: (i) threats from public health measures: (a) level of research into alcohol consumption and harms, assessed through the number of peer-reviewed research papers on alcohol epidemiology [see 25 for details about the selection process]; (b) the existence of an alcohol surveillance system, this is the

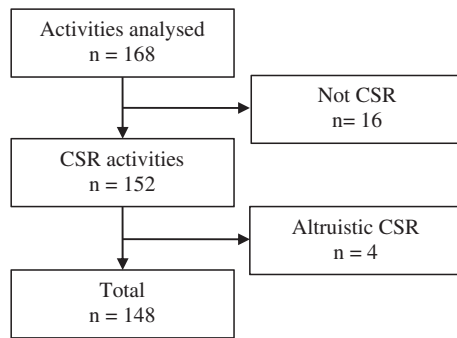


Figure 1. Flowchart showing the number of alcohol industry's corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in Latin American and Caribbean countries by exclusion criteria, 2004–2014.

ongoing systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of alcohol related data to inform public health (0 = No, 1 = Yes), according to the WHO [26,27]; and (c) the number of governmental alcohol policy actions, a compound index with the following variables: presence of national policy (yes = 1, no = 0), taxes on beer, wine or spirits (yes = 1, no = 0 each), sales restrictions on hours, days, places, density, events, intoxication, petrol stations (yes = 1, no = 0 each), level of blood alcohol concentration for driving for general population, youth, professionals (0 = 4, -0.05 = 3, 0.05 = 2, +0.05 = 1, no = 0 each) and age of legal purchase (+18 = 3, 18 = 2, -18 = 1, no = 0) according to the WHO [26]; (ii) per capita alcohol consumption (in pure alcohol litres) from the WHO [26,27]; (iii) economic indices: (a) country income level (low, middle-low, middle-high, high) according to the World Bank [28]; (b) GDP; and (iv) population, also according to the World Bank. Values missing for any year (once for per capita consumption and once for GDP) were replaced by the mean of the variable. Haiti had no alcohol policy information, so the number was replaced by the mean from the low income countries.

Data analysis

Descriptive, bivariate and multivariate analyses were used. Bivariate analyses consisted of Spearman correlation coefficients between all the variables, and single negative binomial regressions to predict rmCSR and sCSR. Each single negative binomial regression predicted the number of CSR alcohol industry actions in one country, with each threat from public health measures, per capita consumption, economic indices and population, as a predictor. Multivariate analyses

aimed to predict rmCSR and sCSR, including the variables which resulted associated with these characteristics in a negative binomial regression model. This model was chosen for the following reasons: (i) there was no evidence of country variance in the relationship between rmCSR and sCSR and country features, hence a multi-level approach did not seem appropriate; (ii) Poisson's regression showed overdispersion; and (iii) even when there were a large number of zeros, the use of a zero-inflated negative binomial regression did not result in model improvement according to the Vuong test. In both models, threats from public health measures and per capita consumption were set as predictors, and economic indices and population size as control variables. All analyses were performed with R software 3.4.1.

Results

Description of CSR alcohol industry initiatives in each Latin American and Caribbean country and countries' features

Table 1 shows the distribution of Latin America and Caribbean countries' features, including rmCSR and sCSR activities. Brazil, Mexico and Argentina presented a higher number of CSR actions conducted by the alcohol industry. Brazil and Mexico also had a higher level of research into alcohol consumption and harms. Per capita consumption was higher in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Venezuela.

Associations between CSR alcohol industry initiatives and Latin American and Caribbean countries' features

Correlations between rmCSR and sCSR alcohol industry initiatives and Latin American countries' features are presented in Table 2. Overall, alcohol industry CSR initiatives were positively related to the selected country features, except sCSR and surveillance system. Although most correlations were low, associations between sCSR and country features were weaker than associations between rmCSR and country features. Both types of actions, rmCSR and sCSR, were moderately correlated (0.42), and both had the highest association with one of the economic indices, GDP (0.37 and 0.26, respectively). The rmCSR had higher correlations with population (0.34) and threats from public health measures (level of research into alcohol consumption and harms 0.32, and policy actions 0.29).

Table 3 shows the results of single negative binomial regressions predicting the number of CSR alcohol industry initiatives in each country, and with each country feature as a predictor. The number of rmCSR

Table 1. *Alcohol industry corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and Latin American and Caribbean country features, 2004–2014*

Country	Threats from public health measures					Economic indices			
	rmCSR ^a	sCSR ^a	Level of research into alcohol consumption and harms ^a	Surveillance system	Policy actions ^a	Per capita consumption ^b	Income level	GDP ^c	Population ^d
Argentina	9	10	34	Yes	20	8	Middle-upper	38	40
Bolivia	1	3	4	No	5	3	Middle-lower	2	10
Brazil	21	13	160	Yes	23	7	Middle-upper	179	194
Chile	2	9	18	No	22	7	High	20	17
Colombia	6	6	49	Yes	21	4	Middle-upper	20	45
Costa Rica	0	4	10	Yes	21	4	Middle-upper	3	4
Cuba	0	0	6	Yes	25	4	Middle-upper	6	11
Dominican Republic	0	2	7	No	16	6	Middle-upper	5	10
Ecuador	3	5	3	No	22	4	Middle-upper	7	15
El Salvador	1	1	1	No	12	3	Middle-lower	2	6
Guatemala	0	3	4	No	8	4	Middle-lower	2	14
Haiti	0	0	2	No	11	3	Low	1	10
Honduras	0	2	1	No	13	6	Middle-lower	1	8
Mexico	11	6	111	Yes	27	5	Middle-upper	105	112
Nicaragua	0	0	6	Yes	19	4	Middle-lower	1	6
Panama	1	1	4	No	14	6	Middle-upper	3	4
Paraguay	1	4	0	No	7	6	Middle-upper	2	6
Peru	1	6	17	No	18	5	Middle-upper	13	29
Uruguay	4	1	8	Yes	17	6	High	3	3
Venezuela	6	5	4	Yes	18	7	Middle-upper	28	28

^aNumber from 2004 to 2014. ^bAverage in litres. ^cAverage per 10,000,000,000. ^dAverage per 1,000,000. GDP, gross domestic; rmCSR, risk management corporate social responsibility; sCSR, strategic corporate social responsibility.

Table 2. Associations between alcohol industry corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and Latin American and Caribbean country features, 2004–2014

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Risk management CSR	0.42**	0.32**	0.24**	0.29**	0.24**	0.20**	0.37**	0.34**
2. Strategic CSR	1	0.21**	0.11	0.14*	0.17*	0.14*	0.26**	0.27**
3. Level of research into alcohol consumption and harms		1	0.43**	0.52**	0.31**	0.32**	0.61**	0.55**
4. Surveillance system			1	0.63**	0.26**	0.33**	0.43**	0.25**
5. Policy actions				1	0.30**	0.55**	0.68**	0.51**
6. Per capita consumption					1	0.66**	0.52**	0.26**
7. Income level						1	0.59**	0.17*
8. GDP							1	0.81**
9. Population								1

* $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$. Spearman’s correlation coefficient is shown. GDP, gross domestic product.

initiatives was positively associated with all country features, with surveillance system and income level having the strongest associations. While the number of sCSR actions was associated with some country features, many had confidence intervals with lower limits very close to the base value, leaving only per capita consumption and income level as solid predictors of the number of sCSR actions in a country. A higher per capita consumption and, separately, a higher income level were related to a higher number of sCSR activities in a country.

Associations between CSR alcohol industry initiatives and threats from public health measures and per capita consumption adjusting for economic indices and population

Predictors of both types of CSR with $P < 0.01$ were included in negative binomial regression models. After

adjusting for the other variables, rmCSR actions were correlated only to the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms ($P = 0.001$, odds ratio = 1.15, 95% confidence interval 1.09, 1.24) and per capita alcohol consumption ($P = 0.002$, odds ratio = 1.45, 95% confidence interval 1.17, 1.81); on the other hand, while adjusting for the other variables, sCSR activities were not related to any threat from public health measures nor to per capita consumption (Table 4).

Discussion

Overall, alcohol industry CSR initiatives were related to the theoretically selected country features. Despite being positively and moderately related, our results indicate that both types of actions (risk management and strategic) had particular associations to the

Table 3. Prediction of alcohol industry corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities by four Latin American country features, 2004 to 2014

		Risk management CSR			Strategic CSR		
		P	OR	95% CI	P	OR	95% CI
Threats from public health measures	Level of research into alcohol consumption and harms	0.001	1.18	1.11, 1.26	0.023	1.07	1.01, 1.15
	Surveillance system	0.001	6.97	3.06, 17.01	0.18	1.53	0.82, 2.85
	Policy actions	0.001	1.18	1.09, 1.29	0.021	1.07	1.01, 1.13
Per capita consumption	Per capita consumption	0.001	1.65	1.31, 2.11	0.002	1.32	1.10, 1.59
Economic indices	Income level	0.001	3.54	1.51, 9.94	0.003	2.08	1.23, 3.67
	GDP	0.001	1.02	1.01, 1.03	0.003	1.01	1.00, 1.02
Population	Population	0.001	1.02	1.01, 1.03	0.001	1.01	1.00, 1.02

CI, confidence interval; GDP, gross domestic product; OR, odds ratio.

Table 4. Adjusted prediction of corporate social responsibility (CSR) alcohol industry actions by each feature of Latin American countries from 2004 to 2014

	Risk management CSR		Strategic CSR	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
Research papers	1.17*	1.01–1.35	1.04	0.89–1.2
Per capita consumption	1.37*	1.03–1.84	1.11	0.88–1.46
Monitoring systems	2.05	0.79–5.65	0.75	0.34–1.65
Policy actions	1.01	0.91–1.13	0.99	0.91–1.08
Income level	1.48	0.63–3.58	1.74	0.82–3.79
GDP	0.99	0.97–1.01	0.99	0.96–1.01
Population	1.01	0.99–1.02	1.02*	1.01–1.04

* $P < 0.05$. CI, confidence interval; GDP, gross domestic product; OR, odds ratio.

selected country features. In general, activities conducted to mitigate externalities (risk management) had a somewhat higher association to the selected country features than those that had both the potential to benefit the industry and the society (strategic).

Considered independently (without adjusting for the other characteristics) both types of CSRs were associated with the country's economy, with better off countries having a higher number of CSR initiatives; they were also associated with population, with countries with larger sized potential markets having a higher number of actions.

Results also indicate that both types of actions were associated with per capita consumption and with threats from public health measures; the number of rmCSR actions were associated with the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms in a country, with the existence of an alcohol surveillance system and with other policy actions; while the number of sCSR initiatives in a country were only associated with level of alcohol research and policy actions. The different associations found for rmCSR and sCSR could be related to the type of actions themselves.

Previous evidence has indicated that economic features may explain industry behaviour [17,21,29]. Our bivariate results were thus not surprising, as one can assume that the alcohol industry might invest in CSR actions in countries with strong economies, large potential markets (population size) and actual markets (higher per capita consumption). In turn, those countries would have a higher research capacity, hence having a higher number of alcohol papers, and more alcohol policies in place in accordance with the above factors. To explore whether this was the case, we determined the association between the threats from

public health measures and per capita consumption while controlling for economic indices and population. We expected that if CSR actions were conducted to increase sales (either preserve or gain new markets) they would be more likely in countries with greater threats from public health measures and related to per capita consumption; as bigger markets would need actions to protect them from public health measures that would threaten high consumption levels. Studies in the sugar-sweetened beverages industry [30] show that investment in CSR is higher in those places where companies may wish to improve their market share, rather than those with a very high or small one, also suggesting that CSR investment may be a way to gain markets, which is in line with previous studies showing a clear marketing component in alcohol industry CSR actions [20].

Because a large market and the alcohol industry development might both be related to the general industry development in the country and the size of the population, we controlled for those characteristics. Our results indicate rmCSR is positively and strongly associated with the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms (even when controlling for level of consumption) and the volume of alcohol consumption per capita (while controlling for level of research into alcohol consumption and harms). This is in line with our expected results, suggesting that this type of CSR activity might be a means to increase sales rather than to benefit society. Although the intra-organisational motives to develop CSR might not be entirely clear for those outside the corporations, our findings show that the higher the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms within a country and their per capita consumption, the more likely rmCSR activities are to occur, independently of the country's economic development and population. One possible interpretation of this finding is that rmCSR actions could be implemented as a way to counteract scientific evidence that brings into light the externalities of the consumption of alcohol products, such as morbidity, mortality, harm to others or societal costs, among others. A well-structured CSR business case could result in an improvement of corporate reputation without effectively solving the alcohol-related problem per se. Moreover, the CSR action itself could even serve the purpose of potentially advertising alcohol products [20] and gaining new markets [30].

From the three potential threats to the industry from public health analysed here, only the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms was associated in the adjusted model, while the existence of a surveillance system and other policy actions were not. It has been shown that private companies from different

sectors seek to take advantage of government absence in certain policy areas to justify the CSR investment [31]. Nevertheless, the present study neither analysed the effectiveness of each country's surveillance system nor the possible political interference of alcohol companies in the policy making process, which could, perhaps, shed light into this result.

Results reported here show that the higher the level of research into alcohol consumption and harms within a country and the higher their per capita consumption, the more likely rmSCR activities were to occur, independently of the country's economic development or population. These results indicate that when other characteristics are taken into account, the country's economic and population characteristics lose their importance as predictors of rmCSR. Whether these findings are related to the alcohol industry's particularities, or to the region's characteristics, is an issue that warrants further research comparing the industry's behaviour across countries and regions.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, results should be considered with caution, and further confirmatory studies should take into account possible confounding factors, such as gross or per capita sales volume, level of unrecorded production and consumption, and each country's public policies level of enforcement. Among the limitations of this study are the imputation of a small amount of country data that were not accessible or outdated, that the access to CSR activities was limited to those that were made public and released by the alcohol producers themselves, and that only indexed research papers were included. Also, small correlations and size effects were found, which should be interpreted understanding that we evaluated characteristics that are affected by and affect many contextual factors.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this work provides new evidence that could serve as a starting point for future research, contributing to the understanding of alcohol industry behaviour and the advancement of effective public policies. Because the industry described strategies such as the International Center for Alcohol Policies (predecessor of IARD) as a tool to manage 'worldwide issues' (seemingly to discourage the countries' local regulations), public health policies should consider that: (i) CSR strategies must be subject to national/international regulations; (ii) if international regulations are applied, alcohol consumption and related problems may have contextual/social aspects

that should be carefully considered; (iii) governments should avoid alcohol industry self-regulation in prevention/intervention of alcohol consumption; and (iv) as recent controversy on the use of responsible drinking term and interventions has been found in the literature [32], public health policies may avoid them.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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