

Alcohol Industry Sponsorship of University Student Sports Clubs in Brazil

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ABSTRACT. Objective: The university sport environment represents an important target for alcohol industry marketing. This study investigated the nature of relationships between the alcohol industry and university student sports clubs (USSCs). **Method:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with board members from 60 active USSCs in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. Interviews were transcribed and subjected to content analysis using NVivo10. **Results:** All invited USSCs participated in the study. Most ($n = 53$; 88%) reported having signed contracts with the alcohol industry (breweries, in every case) to have their sports events and parties sponsored. The most common sponsorship arrangement involved the supply of discounted beer for sport and student events. T-shirts, beer freezers, and stereo systems were also frequently provided by the alcohol industry to support alcohol-related sports events. In addition, the alco-

hol industry event promoters helped market the events and products. In return, the USSCs agreed to exclusively sell the sponsors' brand of beer and/or order and sell a quota of beer at their events. Forty-nine interviewees (81%) reported agreements with alcohol companies whereby open bars (free alcohol events) would also be provided. Despite reporting a range of alcohol harms, participants did not perceive there to be a high risk of harm from the alcohol sponsorship arrangements. **Conclusions:** Most USSCs in São Paulo, Brazil, have formalized contracts with the alcohol industry that promote the marketing, sale, and consumption of alcohol at parties and university games. A critical review of the impacts of these practices and university policies on alcohol industry sponsorship that can take account of the role of such arrangements in student drinking is warranted. (*J. Stud. Alcohol Drugs*, 78, 306–312, 2017)

EXCESSIVE ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION is common in university student populations (Gill, 2002; Kuo et al., 2002) but is even more problematic among university sports participants and fans (Martens et al., 2006; Nelson & Wechsler, 2003; Partington et al., 2013). The level of alcohol misuse in Brazil among university students is also high. A national survey among this population found that 22% engaged in harmful drinking (Andrade et al., 2012). Further, in 2012, a general population national household survey found that 62% of binge drinking and 24% of all social/health problems related to alcohol occurred among those 18–29 years old (Caetano et al., 2015). With regard to sports activities, a large survey conducted with secondary students (14–18 years old) detected higher odds of heavy episodic drinking among adolescents who played sports relative to those who did not (Bedendo & Noto, 2015). In addition, although there have been no published articles investigating the relationship of alcohol harm and sports settings among university students in Brazil, a study

found that medical university students participating regularly in activities at the campus sports association showed a higher risk of consuming both cannabis and solvents than did those not attending the sports association (Di Pietro et al., 2007).

Most of the research on hazardous drinking among athletes and sport participants has examined the roles of social norms, drinking motives, personality, identity, and cultural practices, which account for only modest amounts of the variance in drinking outcomes (Martens et al., 2006; Umhau et al., 2013). Accordingly, researchers have begun to examine the role of contextual factors in problematic drinking, such as direct alcohol industry sponsorship of sports organizations, clubs, teams, and individuals (O'Brien and Kypri, 2008; O'Brien et al., 2014; Sawyer et al., 2012).

The thematic link between alcohol sponsorship (a particular kind of marketing) and sports was recently presented in a systematic review paper (Brown, 2016). Seven studies, all undertaken in developed countries, reported positive associations between exposure to alcohol sports sponsorship and increased levels of self-reported alcohol consumption. Notwithstanding that the target of the alcohol industry producers has shifted to emerging, unregulated economies (Caetano et al., 2012; Jernigan & Babor, 2015; Tang et al., 2013), there is a scarcity of studies in these areas. There is no work we know of that specifically exam-

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ines how sponsorship arrangements are negotiated between sports organizations and the alcohol industry in these newly targeted national contexts.

The alcohol (primarily beer) industry in Brazil is largely unregulated even though it ostensibly follows a self-regulatory code and has some government oversight. In fact, both the code and government regulations are subject to interpretation (Vendrame et al., 2015) and to industry pressure (Caetano et al., 2012). In terms of volume, even with the recent economic crisis in Brazil, the beer industry is expected to reach 13.8 billion liters of sales in 2020, with a per capita consumption of 65 liters per person (compared with 75 liters in the United States for the same year) (Euromonitor International, 2016).

Brazilian university student sports clubs (USSCs) are independent associations created and led by university students and their supporters to represent the students in sports events and other leisure activities. Anecdotal reports suggest that these organizations support themselves at least in part through alcohol industry sponsorships. However, there has been no research examining direct alcohol industry sponsorship arrangements with university sport organizations in South America.

The present study was undertaken to investigate the beer industry's relationship with USSCs in Brazil. This article seeks to answer if, to what extent, and in what ways the alcohol (beer) industry supports student sports clubs and their events, addressing this gap in the literature.

The objectives of this study are anchored in the public health framework known as "epidemiologic cascade" (Jahiel, 2008). This theory conceptualizes ways in which corporate decisions (e.g., targeted marketing strategies aimed at high-drinking environments such as university student parties) influence disease escalation or production (e.g., higher levels of harmful drinking resulting in alcohol-related consequences).

Method

Sample

The study was undertaken in the city of São Paulo, the largest and most populated city (11.2 million) in Brazil and Latin America (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2016). Because a comprehensive/official list of registered USSCs did not exist in Brazil, the composition of the sample was achieved using mixed sampling methods (i.e., informal lists, direct consultation, internal universities links, and snowball sampling; Heckathorn, 2011) until saturation, when no new sport clubs were found. Sixty USSCs were identified in São Paulo between 2013 and 2014. The participants/interviewees in the study were board members (i.e., president, vice-president, director of events) from each of these organizations.

Data collection

Six experienced interviewers were trained to conduct the semi-structured interviews with board members from each USSC. The respondents were interviewed privately, with all interviews recorded for later analysis and lasting an average of 1 hour. The interview quotes added in the results section are an English translation of answers given in Portuguese.

The interview questions were constructed to gather detailed information on the following areas: (a) USSCs and respondent(s) characteristics (e.g., What is your connection to the university and your role in the USSC? What are the sports practiced in your USSC?); (b) Sports events organized (e.g., What are the types and frequency of sports events organized by your USSC during the year?); (c) Other events planned by the USSC (e.g., Are there "open-bar" events?); (d) Sponsorship arrangements and relationship with the alcohol industry (e.g., Has your USSC ever sought or been approached about any sort of sponsorship? What about an alcohol industry sponsorship?); (e) Alcohol sales inside the USSC (e.g., Are alcoholic beverages sold inside the physical space of your organization?); (f) Alcohol marketing strategies (e.g., What are the alcohol marketing strategies displayed in the events and inside your USSC?); (g) Alcohol consumption during events (e.g., Are there instances of harmful alcohol use during your events? How does your club deal with them?).

Despite the potential for participant reticence in discussing their organizations' commercial relationships with alcohol companies, interviews flowed well, with no refusals to answer specific questions. Weekly supervisory meetings were carried out with the research team to monitor the data collection process and ensure data validity and reliability. In compliance with the UNIFESP Ethics Committee (CAAE08905812.8.0000.5505), a declaration of agreement was signed by the USSC representatives. Anonymity of the respondents and their sporting organizations was ensured.

Analysis

The 60 interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for content analysis. Each interview received a corresponding alphanumeric code composed of the following sequence: Public University (U) or Private University (R), interviewee name's initials, and age. The interviews were analyzed using a content analysis protocol that followed a coding, categorization, and inference process (Bardin, 1994; Quivy & Campenhoudt, 2008). One form of data triangulation was used, as suggested by Patton (2002): investigator triangulation (the use of several different investigators). Any disagreements or cases of uncertainty were resolved by a group re-analysis of the interviews. This allowed us to develop interpretations as well as plausible explanations and conclusions. Using these methods provides the best guaran-

tee of validity and reliability of the qualitative data. NVivo 10 was used to assist with the analysis.

Results

Characteristics of sports organizations and board members interviewed

Among the 60 USSCs in our sample, more than half were located in private universities, and 43% in public universities. The study covered 17 private universities (in which there were 34 different clubs) and the two public São Paulo universities (covering 26 diverse clubs). The USSCs were connected to a wide range of degree majors (law, medicine, economics, psychology, journalism, management, engineering, dentistry). Half of the organizations had between 100 and 350 student members. With regard to the types of sports played within the organizations, 86% offered individual sports (e.g., swimming), and almost all (93%) offered group sports including soccer, handball, and basketball.

Most (87%) of the interviews were conducted with a single board member, 12% with two members, and one interview with three members. The great majority of board members interviewed were students (94%). Teachers were club spokespersons in two of the interviews, with an employee paid for by the club in one. In instances in which more than one respondent participated in the interview, the board member most familiar with the question responded. The ages of the interviewees ranged from 19 to 40 years (average 24 years). All interviewed board members had been affiliated with their organization for at least 1 year.

Alcohol industry contracts with university student sports clubs

Most USSCs ($n = 53$; 88%) acknowledged signing formal written contracts with alcohol companies. All of the contracts were valid for 1 year, with an exclusivity condition (i.e., the sports club could not acquire/sell beer products from another brewery while under contract). All the clubs agreed to sell only that particular brand of beer and help promote the beer brand and/or to order a minimum volume of beer for the organized sport events. The brand promotion by the club was undertaken in a variety of ways, including logo placements on equipment and event furnishings (e.g., beer freezers, sound system, beer stands, chairs), and highlighting the brand in organized playful activities and social media posts publicizing the event.

"We have to ensure uniqueness to the brand, the events organized by us only sell the contract brand. If you do not comply with the exclusivity rule the contract may be broken by the company and you lose the benefits."
RBrCi22

Two main alcohol companies were found to use this strategy with one specific brand each: Ambev (manufacturer of Skol beer) and Brasil Kirin (manufacturer of Devassa beer). Two other alcohol companies were mentioned once each by interviewees: the 100% Brazilian-owned brewery Petrópolis (with the brand Itaipava) and Heineken.

The relationship was described in every interview as a simple financial marketing arrangement, without any reference to the nature of the product itself or its potential negative impact on students' safety or wider public health. One respondent provided a rich description of this:

"A student sport association that knows at least a little about business goes after the best agreements. This is how the alcohol companies penetrate; there is a need, a market demand, so there will be an offer." RBrRi23

Interviewees reported that all contracts between sports and the alcohol industry were negotiated and signed indirectly using agencies specializing in marketing to young people through associated events and with the aim of obtaining sponsorship for student sporting events and parties. These agencies would contact individual USSCs to negotiate the sponsorship benefits proposed (e.g., discounted alcohol, free alcohol, cash payments) and to establish the specifics of each contract. Interviewees admitted that these contracts are desired and highly valued by the USSCs because of the funds that could be generated from sponsored events organized by them. In fact, all the organizations that had contracts with the breweries declared that those funds represented their main source of income.

Four of the seven USSCs that did not have a sponsorship contract with the alcohol industry declared that their university would not allow such contracts. The three other USSCs that were not forbidden by their universities to obtain alcohol industry sponsorship said they would like to sign contracts if the industry was interested.

Perceived benefits for university student sports clubs

Of the 53 organizations with alcohol industry sponsorship contracts, the main reported benefits were the financial support provided through discounted alcohol ($n = 47$; 88%), party infrastructure, beer delivery, and providing servers ($n = 52$; 98%), as well as cash or prize incentives (e.g., refrigerators, TVs) for exceeding agreed-upon sales targets ($n = 37$; 70%). Contracts typically imposed a threshold for beer sold at the event in order for the club to earn the discount prices and the opportunity for prizes.

"In general, our criteria to choose the agency and the [alcohol company] that will sponsor our organization is about the company that sells cheaper (beer) or the one that offers a broader package. For instance, the

company that is available to deliver (free of charge) the (alcohol) beverages [would be of interest].” UArPa21

The resources and products provided by alcohol companies included supplying and transporting refrigerators, freezers, tents, drinking glasses, tables and chairs, and parasols to the event. Promoters were also sent to assist with the organization of the party. All marketing materials had the logo of the sponsoring beer brand, which is usually specified in the alcohol industry contract.

In many instances ($n = 31$, 58%) the USSCs said that they received cash financial incentives. These funds could be earned by selling discounted alcohol that is provided to the clubs, and through cash bonus payments for achieving alcohol industry–defined sales targets, as noted below.

“We have a sales target agreed upon with them. If we attain this goal, it is better for the next year because we can ask for a greater amount of money transfer, right?! So, our goal this year was 20 thousand cans of beer.” RWeMa22

“If we exceed the target of beer sold for the period, we win a cash bonus. This helps the organization survive.” RReNa19

Beyond these typical contracts, the beer brand Devassa offers payments (money or products) at the start of a contract without the need for a USSC to meet specific alcohol sales goals. Skol, on the other hand, provides cash payments only when the university sport organization meets or exceeds the contracted alcohol sales targets.

Most organizations ($n = 53$; 88%) reported that the main benefit in the contracts is the discounted price of alcoholic drinks:

“It’s a different price (for us), a lot cheaper. I think [we pay] less than R\$1.00 (US\$ 0.30) for a can and R\$2.50 (US\$0.72) for a one liter beer bottle.” RCaRa21

Events/parties with alcohol use facilitated by contracts with the alcohol industry

Most ($n = 52$; 86%) USSCs reported not only organizing sporting events for the sale of alcohol but also other activities, such as happy hours, barbecues, beer parties (named “cervejadas”), and other functions of varying sizes. Some ($n = 28$; 47%) events covered by the contracts were organized in conjunction with other university student groups and could assemble up to 8,000 students each. Forty-nine USSCs (81%) said that the alcohol industry contracts also make it possible to organize open-bar events (free consumption of

alcohol, with the cost built into event ticket prices). They indicated that the open bar was an attraction for the event and that this method of sales was more profitable.

“Unfortunately this is what attracts the university student population for a party. It is the open bar, the fun games. So you have to offer it, to have a good party, more profits.” RStli23

Forty-three USSCs (72%) noted that students drank more in these contexts, and 42 clubs (68%) said they experienced more problems in open-bar parties (e.g., intoxicated people needing emergency care, security-related incidents, and property damage). Paradoxically, there was a low perception of risk regarding alcohol consumption and open-bar parties, in that the negative consequences were played down in all interviews, characterized as having only minor impacts. In addition, the clubs reported that they did not closely monitor what happens to individuals at the parties, and they were unaware of what happens to people after they leave the parties.

“Almost 20 hours of open-bar party. People do get drunk, there is no way to control this. Alcohol consumption escalates and some problems appear, but they are mild, such as people throwing up I do not see it as a problem to be faced, something like: Oh my God, how many people will be under the influence today? Because in general the gang can take care of themselves.” RCaRa21

“Vomit, go to the emergency room, fights are very common too. I never saw anything that represents a life risk, but fights between drunk people, doing nonsense things, this is common. In the beginning of the party, everything is nice, correct? After people get drunk, people start forming couples, making out [. . .] It is very common to make out with somebody and to regret the choice afterward or ending up having sex and wishing it had never happened.” UCrGo23

Half of the USSCs ($n = 30$) reported that they had never thought critically about the negative consequences of such sponsorships. The perception of the influence of alcohol advertising on consumer behavior also varied widely among respondents—many of the organizations ($n = 31$; 52%) reported not believing one’s drinking can be influenced by advertising or by the industry’s actions.

“Ah, I don’t think alcohol marketing influences alcohol use behavior among youngsters. A hot woman (in the ads) does not mean anything. A fun game promoted by an alcohol brand at an event is not necessarily related to drinking that brand. I will drink because it is within the culture.” RCaRa21

Discussion

Using semi-structured interviews with 60 USSCs in the city of São Paulo, Brazil, we found that there are formally established and well-structured relationships between the alcohol industry (breweries) and student sports clubs. These sponsorship arrangements facilitate provision of alcohol to at-risk populations (students 17–25 years old) by the alcohol industry through university sport organizations (Andrade et al., 2012).

The findings support previous work on alcohol industry marketing strategies. Sparks et al. (2005) documented a shift in the industry's main offensive strategy in regulated markets to engaging directly with consumers through sponsored events. These provide opportunities for product sales and for increasing brand familiarity and favorability through lifestyle connections. Jette et al. (2009), who examined beer industry strategies in Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia, found that youth are a target group because they tend to be cultural trendsetters, they are amenable to new ideas, and, in industry terms, they constitute an underdeveloped market with the potential for growth in per annum consumption and sales.

Despite the fact that the USSC representatives described a number of alcohol-related problems during their organized events, the harms were seen as normal and acceptable. There was little concern expressed or critical evaluation of the impact of these alcohol industry sponsorship arrangements by the USSCs themselves. From the clubs' point of view, the sponsorship simply represented cheaper beer, free transportation of materials to events, assistance with organizing the event, and monetary/financial rewards. Regarding corporate interests of the alcohol industry, the contracts assured exclusivity for their beer brand and a steady number of events with an opportunity to promote and sell their products to a population known to drink heavily (Silva & Petroski, 2012). It is interesting to note that universities also appeared to express little concern about this relationship, with only two private universities (connected to four sports organizations) prohibiting outside funding for student events. The general absence of concern for student social and physical welfare by the USSCs in this study is not consistent with the responsibility of universities to care for students "in loco parentis." Although university administrators were not interviewed in the current research, the lack of university regulations concerning sponsorship agreements with the alcohol industry tentatively supports this conclusion until further research can be conducted.

The same uncritical awareness seems to characterize news media perceptions. Several high-profile cases occurred recently in Brazil linking alcohol consumption among university students with cases of sexual abuse, injuries, and deaths. In one of the most recent cases (February 2015), a student died after ingesting more than 20 shots of vodka in a contest during a university party. This open-bar event was

sponsored by one of the beer brands in this study. None of the news reports that covered the incident even mentioned that the party was sponsored by the alcohol industry (Araújo, 2015).

The present study is consistent with previous research describing alcohol industry sponsorship arrangements with students and sports, in particular (Maher et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2011; Sawyer et al., 2012; Silva & Petroski, 2012). A nationally representative investigation carried out in the Philippines, for instance, found that exposure to alcohol marketing strategies (including being provided with free beverages and seeing ads at sports events) to students as young as 13 years old was related to increased reports of drunkenness. A study from New Zealand comparing the proportion of "healthy" and "unhealthy" industries' sponsorship reported how popular sports among young people are dominated by the latter group, including the alcohol industry (Maher et al., 2006). Other research has found that 88% of the 101 community football teams surveyed in Australia were sponsored by a licensed premise, which allowed them to receive free or discounted alcohol (Sawyer et al., 2012). Such arrangements have been found to be associated with more hazardous drinking in Australian university athletes (O'Brien et al., 2011).

For many decades, the tobacco and alcohol industries have used sport sponsorship as a means to circumvent regulations and promote their products globally (Sparks et al., 2005). For instance, Belt et al. (2014) identified 945 sponsorships for 75 brands of alcohol from 2010 to 2013 in the United States. The most frequent category of sponsorship was sports (28%), and those brands liked most by adolescents were most likely to be the brands used in sponsorships.

In the present study, the role of the beer industry itself in promoting student events and their attendant excessive alcohol consumption and harm appears to be largely ignored (Cousins & Kypri, 2008). This may partly be due to the successful way the industry has framed their role in supporting university student sports associations over decades (Casswell, 2013; Noto et al., 2015). The global alcohol industry, perhaps learning lessons from the restrictions faced by the tobacco companies, has used its corporate "social responsibility" and related charitable programs to help achieve marketing and sales goals and, concomitantly, has framed alcohol-related harms as individualized problems experienced by those who choose to be heavy drinkers (Babor et al., 2015; Jahiel & Babor, 2007). Industry social responsibility programs frequently include relationships with communities and government representatives, who are encouraged to acknowledge and welcome the economic benefits the industry brings to the community, with the alcohol industry portrayed as a "good citizen" (Bakke & Endal, 2010; Casswell, 2013; Pantani et al., 2012; Yoon & Lam, 2013).

A limitation of this study is that the data cannot demonstrate with certainty that the described activities themselves

resulted in more drinking and more problems than would occur without the industry's involvement. Despite the limitations intrinsically connected to qualitative designs, especially considering that these are sensitive subjects, the validity of our results is supported by the consistency of the interviews and the lack of refusals. In addition, this is the first study we know of that examined alcohol industry sponsorship arrangements with USSCs in Latin America, and it is therefore unknown whether the findings reported here will hold in other cities and countries in the region. Nevertheless, the study provides new evidence demonstrating how the alcohol industry engages with USSCs. The study shows how the alcohol industry can alter the drinking environment on university campuses in ways that are likely to support and facilitate heavy episodic drinking, including low prices, all-you-can-drink open-bar situations, and incentives to sell more alcohol. To the extent that such conditions would probably not exist with this level of penetration, diffusion, and pervasiveness without the active involvement of the alcohol industry, it is important for public health authorities to provide greater monitoring of these events (Jahiel & Babor, 2007).

Beyond public health surveillance, this kind of applied research is also needed to evaluate the role of the alcohol industry's sports marketing as an inducer of alcohol-related harms in university and college students in countries other than Brazil. Other areas warranting investigation include university policies and the perceptions and behaviors of university administrators regarding the role of the alcohol industry within their institutions in the face of their responsibilities for protecting the physical and mental well-being of their students. In addition to this work, it will be important to document the benefits that the industry receives through their sponsorships of the student sports clubs. Beyond the sales volume itself, such arrangements may help to build brand familiarity and favorability among university students, who are themselves trendsetters and innovators inside and outside the academy. This could add directly to the lifestyle associations of the brand and, like the epidemiological consequences of the increased drinking that results, provide a cascading effect forward into the broader culture. Such effects are measurable and warrant consideration from both a public health and university administration perspective.

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