The advertising of alcohol in France

The policy of French governments has been progressively to limit the scope and impact of alcohol advertisements and to protect the young from their influence.

The role of the mass media in the promotion of alcoholic beverages or the prevention and cure of alcoholism is extensive. Although the quantity of alcohol consumed per person has been falling in France, there is no doubt that excessive drinking remains a public health problem. In 1970 the annual consumption of pure alcohol was 25 litres per adult; in 1985 the figure was 19.6.

A study was conducted in March 1985 on a random sample of about 1000 people to discover their opinions on the advertising of alcoholic beverages (1). The majority (76%) thought that advertising had a real influence, particularly on people who were depressed. The unemployed and the young were also seen as vulnerable targets. Over half (58%) considered it very important to bring the advertising of alcohol under control.

A second study, undertaken at the request of the Directorate of Health (2), concerned the habits of consumers. The opinions of the public were sought on the extent of use of alcohol, tobacco, and psychotropic drugs by various social groups and on the perceived dangers of these substances. Knowledge of the behaviour of different kinds of people with respect to alcohol was needed to enable the health authorities to construct a strategy for the prevention and cure of alcohol-related problems and to obtain a better understanding of the effects of advertising and the role of the mass media.

In the country and in small towns, according to the survey, alcohol was often consumed without the use of tobacco whereas in certain groups alcohol combined with smoking was the norm—for example, among those who were working hard, among those holding positions of responsibility, and conversely, among the urban unemployed. The study also indicated the smaller consumption among women and the approximate quantities of alcohol used by people in various social and professional categories.

The knowledge gained through this type of research should be passed on to the public so that any action taken by the authorities will be better understood.
The situation in France

Two major advertising campaigns have recently been launched in France by the producers of beers and table wines. Both are aimed at increasing the consumption of alcohol and recruiting new consumers. One of the main techniques used is to associate drinking with desirable life-styles.

In the past few years several new kinds of beverage have been marketed, such as beer containing fruit juice and low-alcohol beers and wines. Originally produced to avoid too great an alcohol intake by drivers, these drinks may paradoxically be a cause of more people taking up drinking and being introduced to the milieu of the bar and the tavern. Advertising may also be used to promote shandy (a mixture of beer and lemonade), but in this case it is the beer content that is always emphasized.

Until recently in France, alcohol advertising was associated with sex, sport, youth, or driving. Because of this strategy during the past 20 years, prevention and health promotion have laid stress on the importance of limited and occasional consumption.

The drinking of wines and liqueurs is traditional in France, and the social environment tends to encourage young people to take up the habit. Moreover, wines and liqueurs have a place in French culture. In films, plays, and novels they are the subject of constant references, which may not even be noticed by the spectator or reader but which constitute a means of promotion—perhaps the best. Authors, producers, and all with high positions in the mass media should avoid presenting drinking as a common habit or one indulged in by charismatic personalities whom others might wish to imitate. Voluntary restraint in this respect would be preferable to censorship and more effective.

The publication of articles in newspapers and magazines urging moderation in drinking may be impeded by the fact that these media receive a considerable income from alcohol advertisements.

Non-compulsory method of reducing alcoholism

Self-regulation by the industry is the aim of the Advertising Standards Bureau (Bureau de Vérification de la Publicité), which has issued a code of practice. The Bureau seeks to bring professionals together to uphold certain standards in advertising. It can expel members or take legal action against those who seriously violate its principles. In 1982, after consultation with advertising agencies and professionals, the Bureau published its recommendations on alcoholic beverages, giving advice on moderation in general, the protection of the young, and the importance of not ascribing to alcohol any stimulating, sedative, or therapeutic properties. In particular, the strength of alcohol was not to be stressed as an advantage of the product.

In 1987, again in consultation with the industry, the Advertising Standards Bureau worked out a code of practice on alcohol advertising. It differs in some respects from

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deliberately altered the message and its meaning. Thus on some posters we are enjoined to “Have a thirst for moderation”.

The French Committee of Health Education has also been active in moderating the effects of alcohol. After previous campaigns on nutrition, dental hygiene, smoking, and accidents, it turned its attention to

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alcoholism. In 1984 it launched a television, radio, and poster campaign to promulgate two slogans—“One drink is O.K.; three cause trouble” and “A second glass for water”. The first was particularly successful; surveys showed that it was viewed favourably by 80% of the population. Both slogans were launched as real campaigns with local activities such as symposiums, videos, and the participation of schoolchildren.

**Legislation and regulation**

In 1949 a law was passed banning the advertising of tobacco and alcohol from newspapers intended for children. It was a good arrangement and has been well enforced.

Another global measure was a statutory code for public houses, adopted in 1955. Alcoholic beverages were divided into classes. In the first group were all the drinks with less than 1 degree of alcohol (which now constitute a problem because they can act as an introduction to drinking). In the second group were beer, cider and wine, in the third appetizers and liqueurs, and in the fourth and fifth groups the strongest alcoholic drinks.

French law on the advertising of alcohol was declared by the European Court of Justice to be in breach of Article 36 of the Treaty of Rome and therefore void. As a result, France experienced an increase in the advertising of alcoholic products, an increase that was amplified by the creation of new television channels. During this epoch, the recommendations of the Advertising Standards Bureau were often ignored.

In 1987 a law was passed limiting the television advertising of beverages containing more than 1 degree of alcohol (10 g/litre). It reinforced previous regulations banning advertising in young people’s magazines and in places devoted to sports activities for the young. It also required that no alcohol advertisements could refer to the young, to sports activities, or to sex, and that no well-known persons could be portrayed in them. The sponsorship of sports events (or of the individuals taking part in them) is often a form of advertising and so no mention could be made of brand names and no pictures or logos of alcoholic products could appear.

Some aspects of alcohol advertising are not dealt with by this law. For example, it does not cover slightly alcoholic beverages or the promotion of alcoholic products in shops. The latter is a particular problem because promotion can be done by posters, by labels on bottles, or by messages on packages, and children have free access to these stores.

After the law was passed, the National Committee against Alcoholism brought a successful action against the people responsible for a television programme in which the name of a brand of alcohol could
be seen and in which a recognizable picture of a make of beer appeared on a car. The National Committee against Alcoholism was created at the beginning of the century. Its current activities are in the field of information and training, mainly in schools or workplaces. It also manages 120 specialized centres.

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The social and pathological consequences of alcoholism give good grounds for the fight against excessive drinking, and this is appreciated by the general public. An efficient strategy must be developed in response to the industrial promotion of alcohol. The mass media are of great importance in this fight because of their powerful influence whether in promoting or in reducing alcohol consumption. It is especially important to protect vulnerable categories of the population. But control measures should not be too rigid. If an exhibition is to be held on wine and the vineyard, must it be forbidden?

In the context of a national programme of health promotion and support for public health activities, a new law was proposed in October 1990 that included, inter alia, the banning of advertising of alcoholic beverages with a few exceptions.

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References


Where health services cannot reach

The mobilization of community health workers is a way of bringing services to the people in places that the official health services cannot reach — services delivered by health workers who are like the people themselves, socially and culturally.