

Global alcohol marketing treaty could reduce drinking harm

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A Massey University researcher is calling for an international convention to control alcohol marketing similar to the one that has been used to help reduce tobacco harm worldwide. As the global alcohol industry relies on

unhealthy heavy drinking for the majority of their profits, the author says the industry often opposes effective health interventions like marketing regulation or reduced trading hours. The author says a global treaty would make it harder for companies to sue governments over restrictive marketing regulations and curb targeted advertising on social media, which is concealed from regulators.

Prof. Sally Casswell, co-director of Massey University's SHORE and Whariki Research Centre and one of NZ's leading [alcohol](#) policy researchers, has had an editorial published in *The Lancet*.

In it she argues the case for a [framework convention](#) for alcohol control, a legally binding international treaty like the one that has been used to help reduce tobacco harm globally. She says it's needed for two reasons:

1. Economic agreements, which allow corporations to sue governments, means it can be hard for governments to implement effective policy
2. The growth of social media and algorithms that enable precise targeting of individuals, which are regulated and invisible to policymakers.

Compared with many low and [middle-income countries](#), NZ (a high-income country) has good alcohol policy in several areas. For example, our random breath testing is good (providing the current government restores the level to the necessary frequency as promised); we do have a licensing system (but this is in urgent need of reform). We also have excise tax in place (although this needs to increase since alcohol beverages, particularly wine, have become more affordable over many years). However, in many low and middle-income countries, which are the main targets of the transnational alcohol corporations, there is a lack of adequate policy in all areas.

For New Zealand, like many other countries, one of our weakest policy areas is the lack of restriction on alcohol marketing. At the time of the law commission review of alcohol policy in 2010 there was considerable public concern about alcohol marketing expressed in the submissions and this led the Commission to recommend legislation to restrict marketing, including banning alcohol sponsorship of sports. Despite efforts by MPs to include these restrictions in the sale and supply of alcohol legislation and subsequent reports there has been no movement and New Zealanders are still exposed to very high levels of alcohol marketing in many venues including sports sponsorship and in the social media. The use of the social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram is of considerable concern. The design of these profit making platforms and the algorithms which are designed to target specific individuals are unregulated and invisible to policy makers. Control of [alcohol marketing](#) in [social media](#) needs a global response and is strong argument for an international instrument such as a framework convention for alcohol control.

The global alcohol industry is very well resourced and very active in the global policy arena and also in national contexts. Their reliance on heavy drinking occasions and heavy drinkers for substantial proportions of their profits necessitates their opposition of effective interventions such as regulation of marketing or the introduction of reduced trading hours. This is seen in New Zealand, as elsewhere, and as Dave Cull, ex-Mayor of Dunedin recently commented following the death of a student at a student party: '...the council attempted to put in place measures to reduce alcohol harm in the city, such as restrictions on the number of liquor outlets in the student quarter and the hours the off-license premises could operate, but that was frustrated by outlets including the country's two supermarket giants successfully appealing the Local Alcohol Policy it would appear that in this country we know the causes of alcohol related harm, so insofar as we won't do anything about them we're putting corporate profits ahead of community well-being.'

The goal of an FCAC is to support all national governments to prioritise community well-being by putting place effective [policy](#).

More information: Sally Casswell. Will alcohol harm get the global response it deserves?, *The Lancet* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(19\)31883-5](#)

Provided by Massey University

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