

User Experiences of Facebook and Online Alcohol Marketing: Social Life as Commercialised Consumption

Ian Goodwin, Ross Hebden, Antonia Lyons, Tim McCreanor

Facebook's global success as a new media corporation is driven by its provision of a popular platform for user generated content that actively encourages socialising, while at the same time allowing for the increasingly sophisticated exploitation of this 'immaterial labour' for commercial gain. The role of online marketing is key to this dynamic, and yet remains a potential source of tension between Facebook and its user base. The maintenance of a user-led social space must be continuously balanced with the requirement to deliver users as data providers and consumers to third party commercial interests. However few studies have examined how Facebook users themselves engage with, and make sense of, online marketing. Focusing on tertiary student drinking cultures and alcohol marketing campaigns, this paper presents an analysis of user experiences with Facebook marketing. Three friendship groups were recruited and their engagement with alcohol, marketing and Facebook interrogated through a discursive analysis. Four main discourses were identified: 'Pleasurable consumption', 'the individual as savvy agent', 'routine everyday socialisation', and 'the story imperative'. Rather than alcohol marketing being viewed as something to be tolerated as one socialises, it is argued that these discourses serve to collapse the boundaries between commercialised content and student drinking cultures, which oftentimes are identified as synonymous with one another. Mediated by the process of 'branding', commercial alcohol companies' activities on Facebook are viewed as part of a mundane and naturalised social experience, and are often not viewed as marketing at all. The findings are discussed in terms of Facebook's business model encouraging a thorough, and increasingly intensive, commercialisation of public and social life.