

Short report

How preferences for volume-based promotions differ between at-risk and non-problem female drinkers

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Introduction

Product promotions—which include price – (e.g., 50% off) or volume-oriented promotions (e.g., Buy one get one free or Buy two get 50% off) – have been shown to influence consumer behaviour and are frequently used by retailers. Several studies have associated point-of-sale alcohol promotions and price reductions with increased consumption and higher occurrence of binge drinking among both adults and young adults (Gardiner & Coase, 2011; Jones, Barrie, Robinson, Allsop, & Chikritzhs, 2012; Pettigrew et al., 2015). These studies, and others like it, contributed to the rationale for a 2011 legislation change in Scotland where a ban on volume-based alcohol promotions resulted in a 2.6% reduction in off-trade sales (Robinson et al., 2014). Although it should be noted that Purshouse, Holmes, and Meier (2014) have argued whether such efforts have resulted in detectable reductions in alcohol consumption. Additionally, these authors commented upon the lack of evidence regarding the influence of volume-orientated alcohol promotions on consumer behaviour.

Research has shown that consumers' preferences are influenced by the framing of presentations, even when they are equivalent in terms of unit cost (Smith & Sinha, 2000). As such, the use of volume promotions (also referred to as multi-buy) for the sale of alcohol is an area of research interest. There is some evidence that these promotions encourage greater consumption among young adults as the 'free' alcohol is seen as a bonus among this cohort, who are frequently targeted in advertising campaigns (Hastings et al., 2009; Jones & Smith, 2011). A relevant question here is whether these volume-based alcohol promotions are more persuasive for individuals at risk for alcohol misuse. For example, will preference for volume-based promotions versus price discounts differ by an individual's self-reported alcohol use? There is no extant research, however, that has attempted to determine whether there is an association between an individual's alcohol use and their preference for different alcohol promotions.

In this paper we examine whether preference for volume-based promotions is comparable between two groups of young adults

differentiated by their alcohol use. It is hypothesized that at-risk individuals will express a greater preference for volume over price-based alcohol promotion deals than those who report non-harmful alcohol use.

Methods

One hundred and eleven participants were originally recruited from a University population via flyers advertising a 10-min online survey, with an AUD100 voucher prize draw as a participation incentive. However, due to an unrepresentative gender distribution in this sample (81% female) males were excluded from the analysis. The final sample consisted of 90 female university students. Ethics approval was gained through the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee. As this was a pilot study to test the feasibility of a novel experimental approach, a power analysis was not conducted.

Participants were asked several demographic questions at the start of the survey, including age and employment status. Socio-economic status was determined from the participants' postcode and based on the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD), one of the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). Deciles of the IRSAD were used, where lower deciles indicate more disadvantage (Pink, 2006). These deciles were collapsed into two SES groups; low/middle (1–7) and high (8–10).

Alcohol use was assessed using the total score from the 10-item Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) scale (Saunders, Aasland, Babor, De la Fuente, & Grant, 1993). Each item on the AUDIT is scored from 0 to 4, providing a possible range of 0–40 points, with a higher score indicating heavier drinking. The standard cut-off score was used to categorise participants into two groups: at-risk drinkers (AUDIT \geq 8), or non-problem drinkers (AUDIT < 8) (Saunders et al., 1993).

As a proxy measure of perceived utility (Smith & Sinha, 2000), participants were asked to identify the deal they felt provided the "best value" for a product. Each participant was required to select one of two promotional deals for each product. Of the two deals, one was a price promotion (50% off) and the other was a volume promotion (comprising two similar offers: "Buy 1, get 1 free" or "Buy 2, get 50% off"). Although the price and volume deals were comparable with regard to unit price, they differed in emphasis,

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with the former focusing on the reduced cost and the latter focusing on the larger volume as part of the promotion. These deals are consistent with previous research in supermarket product promotions (Smith & Sinha, 2000). The two promotional deals were compared against each other, providing a price versus volume comparison per product.

Each of the four products used in this study were presented twice, requiring eight decision choices per participant. Two of these products were alcoholic products (case of beer and a six-pack of mixed drinks) and two were everyday non-alcoholic products (lunch offer and USB flash drive). Each participant was provided with example images of the product (e.g., a case of beer) along with the two promotional deal options.

The primary outcome of this study was a simple binary criterion that indicated the focus of an individual's deal preferences (volume versus price/spilt). For each of the two product types (alcohol and non-alcohol) participants were scored as volume-oriented if 75% or more of their choices were "Buy 1, get 1 free" or "Buy 2, get 50% off" (see Fig. 1). All other participants were classified into one group encapsulating a lack of preference for volume-based promotions, which included split decisions (scoring 50% on volume-based promotions) or price-oriented (scoring 75%–100% on price-based comparison).

Comparisons between the two alcohol use groups were made using the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U, Pearson's Chi-squared and Fisher's Exact Tests where appropriate. Furthermore, to examine the association between volume-based promotion preference and at-risk drinking behaviour, we used a logistic regression analysis to calculate the unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios (controlling for age, IRSAD and employment status) for both product types (alcohol and non-alcohol). Logistic regression diagnostics were tested on both models and were satisfactory (Hosmer, Hosmer, Le Cessie, & Lemeshow, 1997). A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used, and all analyses were performed using STATA 14 (StataCorp, 2015).

Results

The participants were aged between 18 and 25 years (mean 21 ± 1.8 years). Approximately one-quarter of the participants were not currently in paid employment (21%; $n = 19$), with the

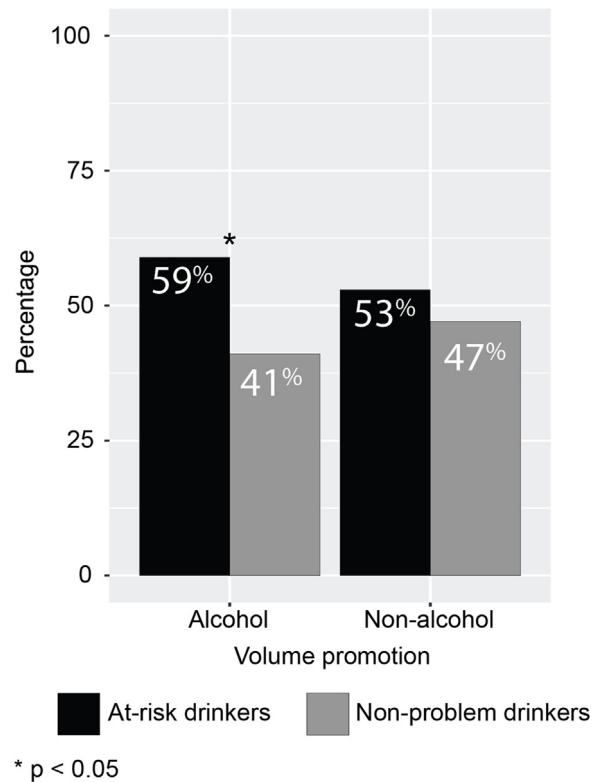


Fig. 2. Percentage of volume preferences by alcohol use risk.

remainder either working on a casual basis (57%; $n = 51$) or working full- or part-time (22%; $n = 20$). Approximately fifty-six percent ($n = 50$) of the participants were classified as non-problem drinkers, with the remainder classified as at-risk drinkers (44%; $n = 40$).

Fig. 2 shows a breakdown of the proportion of participants who expressed a preference for volume-based alcohol promotions, by drinking status. It shows the increased tendency for at-risk drinkers to favour volume-based alcohol promotions. In contrast, there was no such relationship for non-alcohol products. Chi-

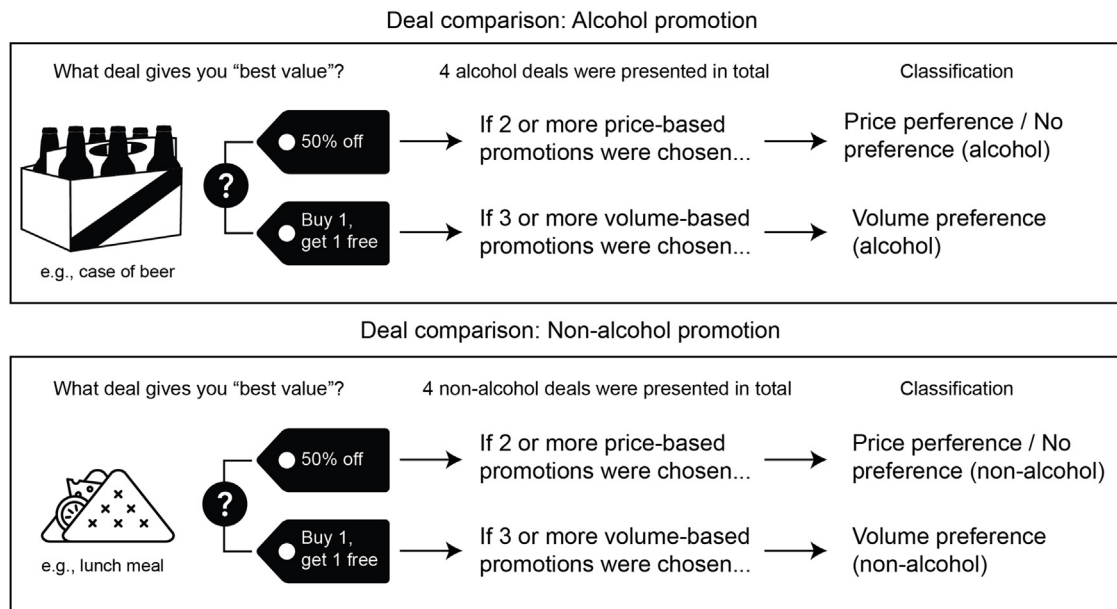


Fig. 1. Study outcome variable: classification of volume preference (or not) for alcohol and non-alcohol products.

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