Drink wisely Australians, but keep drinking: does the alcohol industry in Australia frame the discourse on alcohol to maintain hegemony?

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Abstract
Public health literature proposes that the Australian alcohol industry–funded organisation DrinkWise is a Social Aspects Public Relations Organisation (SAPRO) that favours industry over public interests by deploying ineffective alcohol harm reduction strategies. This research addresses a gap in the critical public relations literature by investigating these claims through an examination of DrinkWise’s source media content. Content and rhetorical framing analysis revealed how the organisation framed the alcohol issue, as well as identifying the messages and message audiences of their media releases. Results supported extant research suggesting that DrinkWise is insulating the alcohol industry against evidence-based public health harm reduction strategies, by engaging in agenda building through industry-friendly framing of the alcohol issue, and dissemination of information subsidies to elites and policy-makers. We discuss the conclusions through a lens of hegemony and develop an argument that DrinkWise media relations is a strategy to maintain a hegemonic individual responsibility ideology.

Keywords
alcohol harm reduction, alcohol industry, framing, public relations, SAPRO

Introduction
DrinkWise Australia is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established in 2005 by the alcohol industry. According to the DrinkWise (2016) website, the organisation aims “to help bring about
a healthier and safer drinking culture in Australia’. DrinkWise claims that through its long-term generational change programme, it can reduce alcohol-related harm by positively altering Australian drinking culture to be more responsible while also promoting the benefits of moderate alcohol consumption (Turnbull, 2014). However, numerous researchers have concluded that DrinkWise campaigns are designed to promote the alcohol industry rather than public health (Babor and Robaina, 2013; Coomber et al., 2015; Daube, 2014; McCambridge et al., 2014; Mathews et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2011; Miller and Kypri, 2009; Moodie, 2014; Yoon and Lam, 2013).

DrinkWise is an example of a Social Aspects Public Relations Organisation (SAPRO), defined as a special interest group funded by sectors the World Health Organization (WHO) classifies as risk industries: for example, sugar, gambling and tobacco (Babor, 2009; McCambridge et al., 2014). SAPROs exist, at least on the surface, to mitigate the social harm caused by the public use of products or services. In 1992, Beck postulated that health is now more important than wealth in self-actualised states and citizens are exerting pressure on governments and industry to lessen the casualty rate, demanding the mobilisation of solutions to risks. In a 2014 survey, The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE, 2014) found that Australians believed that both the government (64%) and the alcohol industry (69%) needed to do more to address alcohol-related harm (p. 3). In this risk-sensitive environment, SAPROs are viewed as industry encroaching on the traditional areas of public health, academic medicine, scientific research, alcohol education and prevention programmes, and alcohol control policies (Babor, 2009).

In Australia, in 2014, alcohol was estimated to have caused 15 deaths and 430 hospital admissions daily, a 60% increase from the last decade (Gao et al., 2014). Globally, 3.3 million net deaths per year, or 5.9% of all deaths, are attributed to alcohol consumption (WHO, 2012: para 5). Excessive or risky drinkers are defined as those who consume more than four standard drinks per day, and such drinkers consume 74.2% of all alcohol sold in Australia (FARE, 2016: 11). Analysis of the National Drug Strategy Household Survey in Australia from 2001–2013 shows that youth under 25 years reduced their consumption over this period even while population-wide consumption remained relatively stable (Livingston, 2015). The same study showed that problematic drinking by those over 40 years had increased and may require future policy attention. Any level of consumption increases cancer risk for a range of cancer types, and 5% of all cancers are estimated, by the Australian Cancer Council, to be attributable to alcohol consumption (Winstanley et al., 2011). Even the long-held view that moderate drinking is beneficial to health appears under doubt following a reanalysis of 87 studies on alcohol and death (Stockwell et al., 2016).

Public health debate about alcohol-related harm has frequently focused on population-wide regulation of supply and marketing. For example, an Australian 2015 Senate Inquiry received multiple submissions that claimed regulation of supply through a volumetric tax would be the most effective solution (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). A 2012 Australian Medical Association (AMA) position paper on alcohol-related harm placed regulation of alcohol marketing and promotion as a top priority. The alcohol industry is vehemently opposed to the population-wide strategies put forward by public health advocates. Along with other alcohol SAPROs like Drinkaware (United Kingdom) and Cheers (New Zealand (NZ)), DrinkWise shares resources with the International Centre of Alcohol Policies (ICAP) based in Washington, USA, and is part of a strong, collective and international effort to protect the industry and maintain the status quo of self-regulation (Casswell, 2013; McCambridge et al., 2014).

This issue has multiple points of interest from a critical public relations (PR) perspective. As public health advocates claim DrinkWise is conducting PR, yet DrinkWise claims to be conducting a change agenda campaign incorporating social marketing; we very briefly disambiguate the concepts. While the understanding of differences between social marketing and PR is low (McKie and Toledano, 2008), at their core, social marketing campaigns are underpinned by evidence-based
research with the goal of measurable reductions in harm. Social marketing goals are not organisation-centric and do not try to promote a particular organisation or increase its profits (Andreasen, 2006; McKie and Toledano, 2008).

Coombes and Holladay (2012) have applied the Gramscian concept of hegemony and ‘soft power’ to PR communication within the public sphere (see Heath and Xifra, 2016) building on the work of Roper (2005) who questioned whether PR symmetry theory, as described by James E Grunig, is rather a strategy for hegemony. However, while media studies have used the concept of hegemony to examine the circulation, legitimation and naturalisation of discourses that promote dominant ideologies, the functional nature of mainstream PR research has been relatively closed to theorising structures of power (Weaver, 2016). Critical PR research can assist in identifying power elites exercising the control and spread of ideological and cultural hegemony (Heath and Xifra, 2016: 206). By applying ideological hegemony as a critical lens, we examine how the neoliberal capitalist discourse of economics serves to maintain an existing set of social practices with regard to alcohol consumption.

The media relations model proposed by Zoch and Molleda (2006) suggests that agendas are built through the tools of framing in conjunction with Gandy’s (1982) concept of the information subsidy. Considered the most vital tool of PR, information subsidies are ‘efforts by policy actors to increase the consumption of persuasive messages by reducing their cost, without reducing their perceived value’ (Gandy, 1992: 142). The other tool of agenda building, framing, usually remains invisible and the impact of frames occurs by stealth (Gamson et al., 1992). Rhetorical framing scholar Kuypers (2010) cements framing as a PR device given that persuasive rhetoric, employed by strategic actors, is a goal-oriented discourse-shaping tool. The empirical news framing study of Carah and Van Horen (2011) sought evidence of the uptake of DrinkWise frames in the Australian media. They found that of the 55 articles in their news sample that mentioned DrinkWise, 30 routinely repeated a frame consistent with DrinkWise’s media releases. Our critical PR research builds on the work of Carah and Van Horen (2011) and shares the assumption that commercially funded groups like DrinkWise are able to influence our perceptions in line with their interests by utilising mass-mediated communication.

In Public Relations Campaigns, then DrinkWise director, Noel Turnbull, presented DrinkWise as an example of best practice (Sheehan and Xavier, 2014). In this detailed discussion of DrinkWise social marketing campaigns and their rationale, Turnbull (2014) listed the key campaign messages, target publics and message tone (pp. 86–103). In our study, we scored the presence, frequency and target publics of the key campaign messages identified by Turnbull in DrinkWise media releases corresponding to the timespan of his case study (2008–2011). A rhetorical framing analysis was conducted on all media releases housed on the DrinkWise website from 2008 to 2014. The study sought to answer three research questions: What messages are contained in DrinkWise media releases and to whom are they directed? How does DrinkWise frame the alcohol issue? How does the DrinkWise frame facilitate the economic objectives of the alcohol industry?

**Methods**

This study employed both a content analysis and a rhetorical framing analysis of DrinkWise media releases. In the content analysis phase of the research, 40 media releases from 2008 to 2011 were downloaded from the DrinkWise website in August 2013. This date range was chosen to match that of the social marketing campaign referred to by Turnbull (2014) and also reflected the organisation’s first 4 years of media relations.

The media releases were read for manifest content or the literal denotative, generally accepted and shared meanings of a message, such as of a word, phrase, speech, advertisement or other media
message (Krippendorf, 2004). The sample was then divided into two groups of messages. The first group contained 13 messages which matched key messages described by Turnbull (2014). The second group were other messages, not considered key by his definition, but identified in the sample. Turnbull (2014) divided message publics into parents, service providers and stakeholders. In our study, messages clearly directed to parents were scored first, and then the remainder were scored as directed to stakeholders, thus combining Turnbull’s categories. While there is necessarily a subjective component to assigning text to categories, the content analysis aimed to break the media release sample down into components and to quantify the different kinds of messages and their targets.

In the second part of the study, media releases on the DrinkWise website were examined using a rhetorical framing approach (Kuypers, 2010). This qualitative analysis was performed on the entire media release content housed on the DrinkWise website and still available in 2014. A sample of 58 media releases was gathered from the site, dating from the organisation’s first media release in 2008 up until February 2014. Entman (2010) argues that framing analysis can and should be directed towards understanding the exercise of power within the public sphere and finds that much framing research fails to comprehend that framing is used to exert political power (p. 332). For PR scholars with an interest in rhetoric and persuasion, the purpose of framing research is to gain an understanding of why and how the rhetor (in this case DrinkWise) wanted to frame the message, how it was executed and how it might have impacted an audience (Zarefsky, 2008). Rhetorical framing criticism also ‘treats the audience as a historical body and uses data available to reach its conclusion on effect’ (Souders and Dillard, 2014: 109).

Two different methods of analysis were applied. First, each media release was analysed using Entman’s (1993; 2007) framing attributes: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral judgement and treatment recommendation. Second, framing devices were determined using Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) constructionist method. Four of the five framing devices were sought in the text: metaphors, exemplars and stereotyped images, catchphrases (stock or frequently occurring clusters of words) and depictions (judgements or portrayals of opponents). We also applied Gandy’s (1992) concept of information subsidy, a tool which, in conjunction with framing, allows PR practitioners to participate in the agenda-building process (Zoch and Molleda, 2006). In the ‘Results’ section, media release excerpts are shown in italics.

Results

Content analysis: what messages are contained in DrinkWise media releases and to whom are they directed?

The key messages which occurred most frequently in the media release sample were those associated with the role of DrinkWise as an information provider. The first most frequent message was present in 25% of the sample and directed to parents: You can access more information (Table 1). The second most frequent message present at just below 10% was a key message to stakeholders: DrinkWise is conducting a campaign targeting parents as part of a long-term generational change program. Another five key messages were present at less than 4% and three were not present in the sample at all (Table 1). In all, 15 of the 40 media releases contained none of the key messages.

When the media release sample was analysed for all messages that could be discerned, Turnbull’s posited key messages were featured less frequently than other messages (Table 2). When all messages were analysed, You can access more information is the only key message which appeared within the top 20 most frequent. The most frequent message was directed to parents but augmented to include their responsibility for the problem: Parents are responsible for children’s learned drinking behaviours, parents are the most important influence.
A significant finding of the content analysis was that drinking problems were located (numerically) with children/adolescents, with the majority of other messages falling in the teen drinking category. The next highest incidences of messages were descriptive of the organisation and occurred with similar frequency to messages relating to the Australian drinking culture. The repetition of descriptive organisational messages suggests that DrinkWise is being set up as a brand, validating Carah and Van Horen’s (2011) research which also found that news media had adopted the DrinkWise frame.

Turning to the target audience to whom messages were directed, the content analysis showed that the majority of Turnbull’s (2014) key messages were indeed directed to parents (Figure 1). However, when considering the content of all messages, it was found that the majority (60%) were not directed primarily to parents. As discussed, the category we have termed stakeholders incorporates both stakeholders and service providers in Turnbull’s terms.

DrinkWise messaging within the sample of media releases was consistent with the key messaging stated in Turnbull’s campaign strategy, but the low presence of total key campaign messages was unexpected considering the importance of media relations as part of a campaign. The analysis identified the repetition of 77 unique messages considered to have the same literal denotative, generally accepted shared meanings. From a total sum of 470 messages, only 56 were key by Turnbull’s standard.

The absence of several of Turnbull’s key stakeholder messages, in conjunction with a slant towards other stakeholder messages found repetitively in the sample, suggests that media relations is being

### Table 1. Percentage of DrinkWise media releases 2008–2011 containing Turnbull’s (2014) key messages, listed in order of decreasing frequency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message target</th>
<th>Key message</th>
<th>Presence</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>You can access more information</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>DrinkWise is conducting a campaign targeting parents as part of a long term generational change program</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Parents are the most important role model for their children</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>Changing Australia’s drinking culture can only be achieved by a collective responsibility approach and all sectors in our community collaborating</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>You have the power to redefine what is normal or acceptable drinking for your children by moderating your drinking</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>DrinkWise can provide information resources for you to use and distribute</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>DrinkWise can provide information on ways in which you can get involved</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>You can play a supportive role in the campaign</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>Your organisation and its members can play a supportive role in this campaign through complimentary activities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Children aged 10–17 admire and have confidence in their parents more than anyone else, even their friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>You can start protecting your children from dangerous drinking long before they go to school</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>You have the ability to define what the Australian drinking culture is</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>The campaign can assist you in your work by encouraging parents to approach you if in need</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
used as a tool to disseminate messages to stakeholders. It is likely that messages purported to be targeted to parents are actually ‘directed’ to a much larger audience including policy-makers and elites. This claim is investigated in the following framing analysis. The implications of the combination of weak messaging and a low presence of actual messages directed towards parents render the idea of social marketing, or the ability to inspire behaviour change through this medium, improbable.

### Table 2. Ten most frequently occurring unique messages in DrinkWise media releases 2008–2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Message target</th>
<th>Message category</th>
<th>Message</th>
<th>No. of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Teen drinking</td>
<td>Parents are responsible for children’s learned drinking behaviours, parents are the most important influence</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Turnbull</td>
<td>You can access more information</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Teen drinking</td>
<td>Message warns parents not to supply or buy alcohol for children</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>Campaign</td>
<td>DrinkWise campaigns are working, having an impact</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Parents need to talk to their children about alcohol</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Teen drinking</td>
<td>Reminder/call to action–check your drinking behaviour in front of children/remember your responsibility to set a good example</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>About DrinkWise</td>
<td>DrinkWise partners with organisations to address responsible drinking/new initiatives</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>Campaign</td>
<td>DrinkWise has launched a campaign</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Australian culture accepts excessive drinking</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Stakeholder</td>
<td>Teen drinking</td>
<td>Over the past five decades, the average age of initiation to alcohol in Australia has dropped from 19 to 15.2 years</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 1. Proportion of messages directed to stakeholders and parents from a content analysis of 40 original media releases (2008–2011) housed on the DrinkWise website.
**Framing analysis: How does DrinkWise frame the alcohol issue?**

DrinkWise, like all strategic actors, promotes a particular version of reality by framing the issue and building an agenda in an effort to set or dominate the media agenda, with a particular worldview. According to Kuypers (2010), rhetorical framing ‘seeks to influence our personal and collective behaviours by having us voluntarily agree with the communicator that a certain value, action, or policy is better than another’ (p. 288). According to Entman (1993), frames diagnose, evaluate, prescribe and predict outcomes for an issue or subject under discussion. That is, framing occurs when communicators either consciously or unconsciously identify the sources causing the problem, make moral judgements about causal agents, present their likely effects and suggest and justify particular treatments (Entman, 1993; 2007). Common DrinkWise frames categorised according to Entman’s (1993; 2007) attributes are shown in Figure 2.

DrinkWise located drinking problems in the age range of 14–24 years and identified culture as the force creating these problems. DrinkWise judged that cultural attitudes to alcohol need to change to address the issue. Parents, as a segment of the culture, were claimed to be a cause, if not the primary cause, of their children’s attitudes to alcohol. DrinkWise also implied that government-produced public service announcements, which stress shock and fear, potentially exacerbate the problem. As a direct solution to this causal interpretation, DrinkWise presented the alternative of a long-term positive approach in its public messaging. Although the onus was placed on parents and individuals to change the culture, DrinkWise undertook to empower parents by reminding them of their obligation to drink responsibly in front of their children. Cultural change would be achieved through the implementation of an education-based social change programme as an overarching recommended treatment to the problem. Moderation and the promotion of moderation were presented as common sense solutions. Drinking harm would be mitigated by a whole of community approach, in which DrinkWise’s role was to supply resources, including research, expert advice and advertisements urging responsible drinking. This issue frame is present over the full 6 years of media releases analysed.

Australia has a binge drinking problem akin to a romance with alcohol is an unusual analogy to express the relationship between Australians and excessive drinking, and potentially alludes to pleasure or feelings of excitement. Frames are often expressed as metaphors to convey abstract issues or concepts (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989), and DrinkWise used both a journey and a combat metaphor to describe its own strategic response to the ‘romance’ issue. Gradual cultural change was also likened to a journey Australians are taking:

> Kids and alcohol don’t mix is a continuation of the generational change journey that DrinkWise commenced last year with its successful ‘kids absorb your drinking’ campaign which informed parents that children form their attitudes toward drinking from a young age.

This metaphor, repeated five times in the sample, evokes a more pleasant connotation than the combat binge drinking metaphor, which was also used to present alcohol-related harm as something that could be fought and won.

Protracting persuasive rhetoric, DrinkWise used concrete language to convey the accomplishments of their mission. This was often achieved through commentary on research that also supported their campaign rationale, for example: DrinkWise Australia’s campaign to highlight the influential role parents play in their children’s future drinking habits has received further public acclaim for their work, this time for Quantum Market Research’s program of research for support of the campaign. We found a tendency to self-aggrandise through repetitive self-promotion, for example: DrinkWise is known for its ground breaking social marketing initiatives, designed to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Definition</th>
<th>Causal interpretation</th>
<th>Judgement</th>
<th>Treatment Recommendation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture: Drinking is part of the Australian culture.</strong> Australia has a strongly ingrained drinking culture.</td>
<td><strong>Culture: Is the force creating the problem/but drinking problems are complex.</strong> What we are seeing both in the media and through health statistics is a substantial binge drinking culture amongst 18-24 year olds and one that is having a serious and significant impact on the safety, health and wellbeing of our young adults.</td>
<td><strong>Drinking is a learned behaviour.</strong> DrinkWise claim parents (morally) know this to be the case. 48% of parents surveyed agreed that parents are children’s role models and are influenced at a young age by their actions.</td>
<td><strong>Change the culture: through education and by the promotion of moderation.</strong> Aide-memoire, timed around cultural events promoting responsibility (not moderation specifically).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age: People commence drinking too young.</strong> Over the past five decades the average initiation to alcohol in Australia has dropped from 19 to 15.2 years (16x). More than a quarter (26.3%) of 14-19 year olds put themselves at risk of alcohol-related harm in the short term at least once per month (16x).</td>
<td><strong>Parents: as a segment of culture are a cause.</strong> If you drink heavily then expect your children to do the same.</td>
<td><strong>Cultural attitudes to alcohol need to change.</strong> A culture that accepts drinking to get drunk is not acceptable (13x). A culture that accepts excessive drinking as a rite of passage is not acceptable (5x).</td>
<td><strong>DrinkWise will empower parents to be agents of cultural change.</strong> DrinkWise expert encourages parents to drink smart this season; drinkwise urges parents to set a good example for kids at the track.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Youth: location of problem 14-24 demographic.</strong> We have a culture of drinking too young and often to excess that puts many Australians at risk of harm.</td>
<td><strong>Government: shortsighted approach/ ignorance insinuated.</strong> Mr McKay (DrinkWise CEO) said it was important that governments were proactive in addressing these issues instead of ignoring a growing problem.</td>
<td><strong>DrinkWise as a solution.</strong> DrinkWise presents the organisation itself as a solution, and its longterm, evidence-based social marketing strategy. For example, as part of Inaugural Building Safer Cultures Innovations Grants, $100,000 was Awarded to unnamed recipients, with the exception of Lions Australia, for a project aimed at educating 18-35 year olds about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption and how to drink responsibly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Figure 2.** DrinkWise alcohol issue frames (bold) assigned to Entman’s (1993; 2007) categories. Exemplar quotes are in italics with high-frequency examples within the total sample of 58 media releases shown in parentheses.
raise awareness of the influence of parents in promoting a safe and responsible drinking culture. Examples of progress and general movement were offered in the following excerpts: campaign had struck a chord with parents, campaigns are resonating with parents; we are on our way; heading in the right direction; building a solid foundation for change; vital step; and vital tools for driving the effort. Evidence of attitudinal change, and thus battle progress, was repeatedly offered in the media releases somewhat prematurely (6 months) after the campaign launch, but tempered with hedging details: There is still a long way to go; there is still a lot the community can do; there are no silver bullets to tackle the complex problem; it is clear that the cultural change process has well and truly commenced; and research shows that while there have been some positive gains there are still deeper underlying attitudes that require further efforts to achieve a long term cultural shift.

We noted an absence of examples of, and stereotyped images to present, risky drinking; instead, this concept was represented by dry statistics and thus remained an abstract concept. This strategy is evidence of the provision of information subsidy to elites to support the DrinkWise rationale of targeting this demographic. A more persuasive framing device, or more compelling description of the problem, would be counterproductive to issues management by potentially inflating negative public perception of the alcohol issue which DrinkWise rhetoric purports to reduce. This conspicuous absence is telling in regard to who stands to benefit and whether the real goal of the campaign is to calm public perceptions of the problem or to reduce substantive harm.

DrinkWise employed numerous frequently occurring clusters of words as rhetorical devices to meld pro-consumption messages with responsible drinking messages, for example: enjoy alcohol with care and responsibility; drink in an enjoyable and safe manner; and responsible enjoyment of alcohol. DrinkWise aims to contribute to the development of a drinking culture in Australia that reduces alcohol related harm and thereby maximises the benefits from moderate alcohol consumption was repeated five times in the sample. The frequent cluster of words, Consuming alcohol too young and to excess is considered undesirable, repeated six times in the sample, consolidates the issue framing.

Gamson and Modigliani (1989) suggest that smart sources meet journalists’ demands for catchphrases by providing their own. The campaign titles Kids absorb your drinking and Kids and alcohol don’t mix could be considered concrete catchphrases to elicit action, keep the drinking focus on the youth demographic and underline parental responsibility. Parents were appraised of their responsibility through paternalistic instruction presented in a non-paternalistic fashion such as the catchphrase DrinkWise aims to empower parents. The idea that Australians under the guidance of DrinkWise’s education had embarked on a generational change journey was repeated seven times in the sample and further exemplifies what we found to be a majority of positive frame supporting rhetoric.

Perhaps, in alignment with positive rhetoric, the portrayal of opponents through depictions was underutilised as a framing device within the media releases and, contrary to reality, DrinkWise is presented as opponent-free. There was one media release exception which depicted DrinkWise critics as petty and negative: Petty criticism is easy, doing something positive is much harder. Let this be a message to those public health critics that consider the DrinkWise approach as PR. Our strategy is proving effective – the results speak for themselves. DrinkWise constructed a version of reality in which government, health professionals and researchers, high-profile sports celebrities and community were united and, moreover, complicit in the DrinkWise education solutions. As discussed in the ‘Introduction’ section, health researchers are not united in the DrinkWise mission, with 58 signing a petition to reject DrinkWise industry-backed funding for alcohol research (Miller et al., 2009). In fact, we struggled to find any public, political or
academic support for DrinkWise. We conclude that the positive rhetoric (essential for brand alignment) and effective use and non-use of Gamson and Modigliani’s framing devices lend strong support to the social construction of a DrinkWise frame which facilitates the economic objectives of the industry.

Discussion

Turnbull’s (2014) case study of the DrinkWise campaign 2008–2011 offered an opportunity to investigate the stated strategies of DrinkWise by examining the content and meaning of media releases housed on the DrinkWise website. Results revealed that the media release sample did contain key messages identified by DrinkWise, but at a surprisingly low rate. Some key messages were completely absent. Using the simple device of separating message targets into parents and others, we showed that the majority of all messages were targeted to a broader audience than parents alone. This suggests that through the PR tools of issue framing and information subsidies, DrinkWise media relations functions as indirect lobbying to policy-makers and elites on behalf of alcohol industry interests. Moreover, DrinkWise media relations builds an industry-friendly agenda in opposition to that of public health, which may have adverse impacts on improving alcohol-related harm outcomes for Australians. This examination of DrinkWise media relations from a PR perspective complements the DrinkWise news framing research from a journalism perspective carried out by Carah and Van Horen (2011).

How does the DrinkWise frame facilitate the economic objectives of the alcohol industry?

Through systematic analysis of organisational media releases, we found textual evidence to suggest that the framing of the alcohol issue by DrinkWise facilitates the economic objectives of the alcohol industry. While it is not unreasonable for an organisation to promote its own industry, misrepresenting this aim as in the public interest is problematic. Furthermore, DrinkWise framing appears to be benefiting industry interests at the expense of the public interest. Industry-friendly frames are disseminated through a technically independent organisation, which also allows DrinkWise a formal position in the public debate. DrinkWise defined culture as the problem and selected education as the apparatus to realise cultural change. However, privileging education renders the evidence-based alcohol-related harm reduction strategy of reduced consumption unnecessary. The DrinkWise framing of education focuses on individual self-regulation, quite a different objective to the AMA’s (2012) recommended critical media literacy education for young people regarding alcohol, presumably to combat its pervasive marketing to them. We question the PR ethics of concealment of the ‘evidence-based’ story on alcohol harm reduction and attribute this exclusion as evidence of DrinkWise protecting industry profits. DrinkWise’s campaigns cannot be classified as social marketing (McKie and Toledano, 2008), considering framing clearly performs the function of issue management on behalf of the alcohol industry.

The DrinkWise media relations discourse implicitly promotes a rationale of targeted solutions by dividing the population into responsible and irresponsible drinkers. Similarly, framing excessive alcohol consumption as essentially a youth problem justifies an education approach and negates the need for a more holistic solution. From this perspective, increasing taxation on alcohol as a harm reduction measure would lead to price increases, in effect unfairly discriminating against responsible other age drinkers. Evidence from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey in Australia suggests that problematic drinking spans a range of ages, with older drinkers worthy of
more consideration in the debate (FARE, 2016). The DrinkWise frame mirrors the policy of alcohol peak industry bodies and other alcohol SAPROs who support targeted solutions and oppose regulation. However, whereas peak bodies protect industry interests by direct lobbying, DrinkWise’s information subsidies function as indirect lobbying to elites and policy-makers. DrinkWise’s sponsored attitudinal and academic research subsidises governments who make political decisions on consumer attitudes and may not have the resources to invest in data collection (Gandy, 1982, 1992) and positions DrinkWise to select and contextualise research to benefit the organisation and its funders. Attitudinal research cherry-picked for information subsidy combined with media relations techniques provides consistent media ‘noise’. Most importantly, the DrinkWise frame foregrounds parental influence and backgrounds other societal factors, powerfully implying that parental influence is greater than alcohol industry marketing and even peer group pressure. The DrinkWise media frame blames the Australian culture of drinking and puts the onus of responsibility on families, thus neatly avoiding the central role of the industry in embedding alcohol in that culture through marketing. The DrinkWise framing of the alcohol issue appears to justify an ongoing social marketing campaign, allowing DrinkWise and the alcohol industry to position themselves as beneficent instigators of cultural change. Taken together, evidence from the public health sector suggests that a significant reduction in alcohol-related harm is unlikely to be achieved without an overall reduction in alcohol consumption. FARE estimates that if risky drinkers (>4 drinks per day) reduced their consumption to National Health and Medical Research Council guidelines (2 drinks per day), there would be a 39% drop in alcohol consumption (FARE, 2016). We do not expect DrinkWise or the alcohol industry to support such a reduction of their own profits, but to disguise their PR as in the public interest is hypocritical. As Casswell (2013) has noted, the same conflict of interest exists for the tobacco industry; however, this industry is firmly excluded from the public policy arena.

Looking at the results through the critical lens of hegemony offers a glimpse into the micro-strategies of a global communication strategy to normalise personal responsibility as the most ‘common sense’ solution to reduce alcohol-related harm. DrinkWise framing reflects a market justice approach to the issue, as opposed to the social justice approach favoured by public health. This market justice approach aligns with neoliberal Western values of individual responsibility and antagonism to regulation. In a society that values personal freedom, this may well be viewed as a ‘common sense’ approach. However, this can also be viewed as hegemony, or the attainment of public and government consent for corporate practices through an ideological perspective (Heath and Xifra, 2016; Roper, 2005). Hegemonic consent is achieved through a process of negotiation and concession and by presenting solutions as common knowledge or common sense (Hall, 1998 cited in Roper, 2005: 72). Hegemony can also be achieved through subsidised research promoting the arguments of powerful institutional actors in the private sphere (Gandy, 1992). Viewed through this lens, the more convincingly DrinkWise communication is presented as social marketing for cultural change, the more disruption it poses to evidence-based strategies of harm reduction such as regulation. As Roper (2005) has noted, hegemony is contested continually in the civil society through the vehicle of discourse, and ideas are not necessarily imposed on a passive public without question (p. 70). However, the ‘soft power’ of the multi-million dollar alcohol industry, in a neoliberal environment that champions personal choice, is difficult for individuals to resist. It may also prove too costly for states to contest on behalf of their citizens. The critical approach we have taken has attempted to reveal the spread of ideological and cultural hegemony by the alcohol industry. The success of DrinkWise and other alcohol SAPROs in framing alcohol-related harm as a cultural problem is that is it almost unthinkable to view alcohol as a harmful substance that a civil society might ultimately choose to restrict.
Conclusion
This research advances our understanding of how PR intersects with media relations theories of information subsidy, issue framing and agenda building by observing the constitutive effects of those theoretical applications in a real world situation. We conclude that DrinkWise agenda building has ultimately sought to influence policy debate and facilitate the interests of the alcohol industry. That is to say, the source frames and messages identified in DrinkWise media releases promote the collective agenda of the alcohol industry under the guise of social marketing, undertaken in the name of public interest. The blurred boundary between social marketing and PR practice may allow risk industries to dissemble and present their main purpose as social marketing while the goal is the achievement of organisation-centric ends. DrinkWise issue framing demobilises antagonists with competing frames, particularly those seeking heightened government regulation. DrinkWise assigns blame to culture, youth, their parents and ultimately the individual. If this already sounds like ‘common sense’, it may be the result of almost a decade of DrinkWise framing and the maintenance of the hegemonic discourse of individual responsibility.

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