DISPELLING THE MYTH: ADVERTISING BANS AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

by

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INTRODUCTION

There is an unfortunate tendency in American public policy debates to attempt to solve long-standing, complex, and multi-dimensional problems with simple solutions that resemble political slogans or sound-bites more than serious attempts to deal with difficult issues. Although this tendency is found across the policy spectrum it is particularly obvious in policy debates that involve advertising. Because of its ubiquity and its allegedly extraordinary powers of persuasion, restricting advertising is often seen as an obvious, simple, "cost-free" and uncontroversial solution, especially for problems involving health.

A number of voices, for instance, have argued that the best way to deal with the alleged epidemic of fat Americans is to ban all advertising of "unhealthy" food. Critics, for example, have recently criticized McDonald's corporate sponsorship of PBS's venerable Sesame Street as an instance of advertising inappropriately "targeting" children. Then too, there have been frequent calls for several years from anti-smoking activists to ban all tobacco

advertising on the supposed grounds that such ads lead to youth smoking.

Not surprisingly then the "advertising solution" has recently emerged in the current debate about how best to deal with the problem of underage drinking, with one presidential candidate proposing a national ban on alcohol advertising and the recent National Academy of Sciences study on underage drinking, which recommended limits on advertising.

What makes these often simple-minded attacks on advertising particularly regrettable is that they propose solutions that fail the most basic tests of good public policy. For example, it is uncontroversial that legitimate public policy is based on objective, substantial and careful evidence, is reasoned, coherent and consistent, and is carefully designed to achieve its stated goals. Yet it is strikingly obvious that advertising bans fail all of these tests of legitimate public policy. While advertising bans might play well on the campaign trail or at the carefully staged news conference, they do not hold up in the face of careful social science evidence about advertising and its effects.

I. WHAT ADVERTISING DOES

The supporters of advertising restrictions and bans are generally believers in what students of advertising call the strong theory of advertising popularized by Vance Packard's 1956 book THE HIDDEN PERSUADERS. Packard and his contemporary adherents believe that advertising changes people's attitudes through manipulative psychological techniques and because of this is

able to change their buying behavior. This means that advertising is capable not only of increasing the sale of individual brands but of entire product categories, e.g. alcohol.

What is most striking about this conception of advertising is the fact that it relies so heavily on theoretical arguments about human nature — people's ideas about their needs and wants are easily manipulated and human behavior is easily changed — rather than on empirical evidence about what advertising actually does in the marketplace. While this might have been acceptable in the 1950s when there were few empirical studies about advertising, it is not acceptable after some forty years of careful research on the nature of advertising.

What this research has shown is that most advertising is directed toward the selling of branded goods and services, that many advertisements fail in their objectives and that advertising's effectiveness is not proportional to the amount spent. For instance, of the 9-10,000 brands being advertised in a given year, the average consumer will buy only about 400.[1] Moreover, data on individual marketing campaigns suggests advertising campaigns for established brands are successful only from 20-30% of the time.[2] Campaigns for new brands are

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[1] W. Fletcher, HOW TO CAPTURE THE ADVERTISING HIGH GROUND, Century Business, 1994.

[2] Proceedings of the Marketing Science Institute Conference Evaluating the Effects of Consumer Advertising on Market Positions Over Time: How to Tell Whether Advertising Ever Works, Report No. 88-107, 3, 1988.

successful even less often.

The evidence detailing how advertising works is both extensive and varied, coming from econometric studies, case histories of advertising campaigns, analyses of advertising expenditures in particular markets and comparative studies of countries with and without advertising bans for various products.

Consider, for example, the evidence of case histories that have been published for the last twenty years by the UK's Institute of Practitioners in Advertising. The case histories are part of the Institute's Advertising Effectiveness Award program which is designed to showcase both how advertising campaigns are created and the effectiveness of such campaigns. The case histories, published in the series *Advertising Works*,[3] now include over 200 examples with several hundred more unpublished. Commenting on these case histories, Mike Waterson observed that:

> Careful examination of these case histories makes it absolutely clear that the overwhelming majority of the advertising campaigns submitted for this competition are firmly brand-orientated and that most of the non-brand campaigns are not for products at all, but government information, charity, recruitment and other such-like campaigns.... The overwhelming majority of evidence suggests that campaigns are not directed to changing overall market sizes and do not accidentally result in overall market changes, except in some very specialist and small product areas. It should be stressed that these are prize-winning campaigns where positive results

[3] *Advertising Works Case Histories*, IPA, various years.

> have been obtained and ... are the areas of activity where it is clear that advertising did have an impact.[4]

Equally interesting is the work that has been done on correlations between advertising expenditures and sales in particular types of mature markets. Henry[5] for instance, examined the UK food market in two studies over a ten year period. After looking at sixteen major food categories including breakfast cereals, cookies, frozen vegetables, instant coffee and bread, he concluded that in such mature markets advertising, though perhaps useful as a competitive tool between brands, did not affect the market size in any way.

A similar analysis of UK newspaper sales during the late 1980s showed that despite a 200% increase in advertising expenditures, total newspaper sales actually declined while individual paper market shares remained unchanged.

What emerges then from the empirical evidence about the effectiveness of advertising is something much closer to what has been called the weak theory of advertising, namely, human behavior is extraordinarily resistant to change, as modern psychology suggests. Advertising is not powerful enough to change peoples' beliefs and behavior. The reasons for this are that advertising arguments are extremely compressed, typically 30-60 seconds and people through selective perception tend to disengage from the vast majority of these

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[4]M. Waterson, *Advertising, Brands and Markets*,in J. Luik and M. Waterson Eds. ADVERTISING AND MARKETS NTC, 23, 1996.

[5] H. Henry, *Does Advertising affect market size?*, ADMAP, Jan. 1996.

ad arguments. This means that advertising is used primarily in mature markets like alcohol as a defensive tool: it is deployed to retain existing customers rather than to increase sales through gaining new customers.

II. ADVERTISING AND ALCOHOL

Whatever the empirical evidence shows about the effects of advertising on mature markets, the advocate of alcohol advertising bans might argue that with alcohol things are different, particularly with respect to young people. Relying on the single distribution theory,[6] which argues there is a causal chain between (1) the availability of alcohol and (2) the per capita consumption of alcohol and (3) the extent of alcohol-occasioned harm, the proponents of bans see alcohol advertising as a crucial determinant of the "social" availability — that is acceptability — of alcohol.

These claims, however, also run counter to an impressive body of econometric studies involving statistical analyses of alcohol consumption. These studies look at how alcohol consumption (the dependent variable) is affected by factors such as alcohol price, consumer income, other prices, and alcohol advertising (the independent variables). Most of this work has been undertaken in the U.S. and the UK, although there have been some studies that have looked at other European countries.

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[6]W. Schmidt and R. Popham *The Single Distribution Theory of Alcohol Consumption*, I. STUD. ALCOHOL, 39: 400-419, 1978.

The major econometric study of U.S. alcohol consumption is by Franke and Wilcox[7] who looked at beer, wine and spirit consumption from 1964-1984. They found no statistically significant relationship between beer advertising and consumption and a small statistically significant relationship between wine and spirit consumption and advertising. The authors concluded however that advertising did not significantly affect total consumption during the period under review. A more recent analysis by Tegene,[8] which used data for 21 years (1954-1975), found that advertising had no statistically significant affect on wine, beer or spirit consumption during the period. Another econometric analysis by Nelson and Moran[9] provided additional support for the claim that there is no significant relationship between alcohol advertising and consumption.

In the UK there have been a number of studies beginning with McGuiness[10] who looked at advertising, income, price and the number of places

[7]C. Franke and C. Wilcox, *Alcoholic beverage advertising and consumption in the United States*, JN. OF ADVERTISING, 16 (3), 22-30, 1987.

[8]A. Tegene, *The Kalman filter approach for testing structural change in the demand for alcoholic beverages in the United States*, APPLIED ECONOMICS, 22, 1407-1416, 1990.

[9]J. Nelson and J. Moran, *Advertising and U.S. alcoholic beverage demand: System-wide estimates*, APPLIED ECONOMICS, 27 (12), 1225-1236, 1995.

[10]T. McGuinness *An econometric analysis of total demand for alcoholic beverages in the UK, 1956-1975*, JN. OF INDUSTRIAL ECONOMICS, 29, 85-109, 1980. *See also* T. McGuinness, *The demand for beer, spirits and wine in the UK, 1956—1979*, in M. Grant et al Eds. Economics and Alcohol, Gardner Press, 238-242, 1983.

where drinks could be purchased as independent variables. He found a statistically significant relationship for spirits but no affect for wine and beer. Hagan and Waterson[11] used real expenditure on alcohol rather than alcohol consumption as the dependent variable with price, consumer income and advertising as independent variables. They found no statistically significant affect on alcohol sales from 1961-1980.

Waterson[12] also notes a series of changes in the UK drinks market that show the disconnect between advertising and consumption. For instance, from 1978 to 1987, beer advertising (total adspend) rose by over 80% while beer consumption fell by 14%. Between 1978 and 1987 advertising for spirits increased by 70% while sales fell by 4 %. During the same period advertising fell in the wine market by 26% while sales increased by 65%.

Finally, in a series of studies beginning in 1981 and continuing to 2003, Duffy[13] looked at the affects of advertising on the UK drink market, concluding that the "responsiveness of . . . demand with respect to advertising becomes

[11]L. Hagan and M. Waterson, *The Impact of Advertising on the United Kingdom Alcoholic Drink Marke*t, Advertising Association, 1983.

[12]M. Waterson, *Advertising and Alcohol: An Analysis of the Evidence Relating to Two Major Aspects of the Debate,* INTERNATIONAL JN. OF ADVERTISING, 8 (2), 111-132, 1989.

[13]M. Duffy, *The Influence of prices, consumer incomes and advertising upon the demand for alcoholic drink in the United Kingdom: An econometric study*, BRITISH JN. ON ALCOHOL AND ALCOHOLISM, 16 (4), 200- 208, 1981. M. Duffy, *Advertising and food, drink and tobacco consumption in the United Kingdom: a dynamic demand system*, AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICS, 28, 51-70, 2003.

insignificantly different from zero."[14]

The major econometric study of advertising and alcohol consumption in Europe is Calfee and Scheraga,[15] which looked at four European countries — France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. For comparative purposes Sweden, which has banned alcohol advertising since 1979, was included. Advertising expenditures, price and per capita disposable income were independent variables during a period from 1971-1989. Interestingly, the authors found that consumption in all but one of the countries peaked around 1980 while advertising expenditures continued to increase. While price and consumer income were found to have a statistically significant impact on consumption in all of the countries, advertising was not found to have any influence. Most interestingly the authors discovered that strong social forces (changing attitudes toward drinking) contributed to a declining consumption that advertising was powerless to prevent.

III. ALCOHOL ADVERTISING BANS

If the evidence about the nature of advertising and the empirical evidence about advertising and alcohol consumption are correct then it follows that

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[14] *Ibid.*

[15] J.Calfee and C. Scheraga, *The Influence of Advertising on Alcohol Consumption: A Literature Review and An Econometric Analysis of Four European Nations*, INTERNATIONAL JN. OF ADVERTISING, 13, 287-310, 1994.

advertising bans are not a consistent and coherent policy response to underage drinking for they cannot possibly meet their policy objective of reducing such drinking. The evidence about the failures of such advertising bans comes from Canada, the U.S. and Europe.

In Canada two experiences with advertising bans, one of short duration in the province of British Columbia and the other lasting some 58 years in Saskatchewan, have been analyzed to determine the relationship between advertising and consumption. The British Columbia ban prohibited alcohol advertising from September 1971 to October 1972. Smart and Cutler, in their analysis[16] of the effectiveness of the ban, noted that "the yearly per capita consumption data do not show any striking effects of the ban on sales."[17] Indeed, despite the limitations of the ban the authors concluded that "the data presented lent little support for the view that the B.C. advertising ban reduced alcohol consumption. Both the yearly and monthly analyses of beer, wine or liquor consumption show no substantial effect of the ban."

The Saskatchewan ban, being of considerably longer duration, provided a much better opportunity to test the claim that alcohol advertising increases consumption by a real time measure of the effect of alcohol advertising on a population that had not been previously exposed to such advertising.

[16]R. Smart and R. Cutler, *The Alcohol Advertising Ban in British Columbia: Problems and Effects on Beverage Consumption*, BR. JN. ADDICTION, 71, 13-21, 1976.

Makowsky and Whitehead,[18] who examined the affects of the ban's repeal, hypothesized that allowing alcohol advertising would lead to an increase in alcohol consumption. In order to test the hypothesis the authors compared the experience of Saskatchewan with New Brunswick, which had a similar ban on alcohol advertising that continued.

The results of the study failed to confirm the authors' hypothesis. Data was collected on monthly alcohol sales from 1981-1987, for both Saskatchewan and New Brunswick. Even after allowing for a gradual build-up of advertising affects, the authors concluded that "The change in legislation regarding alcohol advertising produced neither an abrupt permanent nor a gradual permanent effect on the pattern of the total volume of sales in Saskatchewan."[19] What did happen, according to Makowsky and Whitehead, was a significant shift in consumption patterns, with beer consumption increasing while spirit consumption declined. "In spite of what appears to be a substitution effect between beer and spirits, overall sales of alcohol did not increase between 1981 and 1987 in Saskatchewan . . . there was no increase in the overall level of sales in Saskatchewan following a change in advertising policy."[20] In comparison

[17] *Ibid*.,16.

[18]C. Makowsky and P. Whitehead, *Advertising and Alcohol Sales: A Legal Impact Study*, JN. STUDIES ON ALCOHOL, 52 (6), 1991.

[19]*Ibid.*

[20]*Ibid.*

with New Brunswick, where total sales did not change, the authors note "the change in alcohol policy in Saskatchewan, when viewed in context of changes in New Brunswick during the same period, presents little support for the contention that alcohol advertising contributes to alcohol consumption."[21]

In the U.S. two studies have examined the purported effects of advertising restrictions. The first by Ogborne and Smart[22] compared Canadian and U.S. data. The U.S. data examined per capita consumption and alcoholism in each state. The authors concluded that advertising restrictions had no discernable effect on either total consumption or alcoholism. The second study by Schweitzer et al[23] was a cross-sectional analysis of both alcoholism and total consumption in 35 selected states during one year. In a finding that would be duplicated by Makowsky and Whitehead they found that advertising restrictions shifted the pattern of drinking (from beer to spirits) but did not reduce consumption.

In the early 1990s Safer[24] looked at seventeen Organization for Economic

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] A. Ogborne and R. Smart, *Will restrictions on alcohol advertising reduce alcohol consumption,* BR. JN. OF ADDICTION, 75, 293-296, 1980.

[23] S. Schweitzer et al, *Alcoholism: An econometric model of its causes, its effects and its control,* in M. Grant et al Eds., ECONOMICS AND ALCOHOL, Gardner Press, 107-127, 1983.

[24] H. Safer, *Alcohol Advertising bans and alcohol abuse: An international perspective*, JN. HEALTH ECONOMICS, 10, 65-79, 1991.

Cooperation and Development countries in an effort to determine whether restricting broadcast alcohol advertisements affected alcohol consumption, road accidents and deaths from liver disease. He found that there was no statistically significant connection between advertising restrictions and liver disease but that there was such a connection between total consumption and road accidents, with lower consumption and fewer accidents in countries with greater restrictions. Safer's analysis was criticized by Young[25] who after re-examining the data concluded that Safer had mistaken the direction of causality. Rather than advertising bans bringing about lower consumption, lower consumption probably encouraged the creation of a political and regulatory climate where bans were possible. Young also argued that the restrictions Safer examined had actually resulted in increases, not decreases, in consumption.

Calfee and Scheraga[26] in their comparative analysis of European countries included Sweden in a separate data run for the years of its advertising ban, 1979-1989, in order to test the theory that consumption should be different during a ban. They concluded that the banning of advertising in Sweden "had little if any effect on the dynamics of the Swedish market."[27] When Sweden was

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[25]D. Young, *Alcohol advertising bans and alcohol abuse: Comment*, JN. HEALTH ECONOMICS, 12, 213-228, 1993.

[26]*Op cit.*

[27]*Op cit.*, 299.

compared with the Netherlands and the UK, "similar nations with and without advertising," as the authors note, the results "suggest that banning advertising does not substantially affect the workings of the alcohol market."[28]

The individual econometric studies of alcohol advertising bans support R.G. Smart of the Addiction Research Foundation who, after a comprehensive review of all the data, concluded that "The evidence indicates that advertising bans do not reduce alcohol sales, total advertising expenditures have no reliable correlation with sales of alcoholic beverages and ... experimental studies typically show no effect of advertising on actual consumption."[29]

IV. ALCOHOL ADVERTISING AND YOUTH

Of all aspects of this debate the most emotional and the most shamelessly exploited by those advocating advertising restrictions are those that touch on young persons. Two youth-specific arguments are typically advanced as justifications for bans. First, it is suggested that youth are much less sophisticated about what advertising is and how it works and hence much more susceptible to its influences than adults. Second, it is suggested that increases in youth consumption could well be masked in econometric studies which focus

[28]*Op cit*., 302.

[29]R. Smart, *Does alcohol advertising affect overall consumption? A review of empirical studies*, JN. STUDIES ON ALCOHOL, 49, 323, 1988.

on total consumption. Thus, even if advertising restrictions are not justified by their effects on adult populations, they are in terms of their benefits for young persons.

Like so many of the arguments deployed in this debate the first claim loses its theoretical plausibility in the face of a vast amount of empirical evidence. The notion that young persons and children in particular are unaware of advertising's persuasive intentions has been shown to be untrue in a number of research settings. For example, Preston, writing about the unintended effects of advertising on children noted that "there has long been evidence that even pre-school children are sophisticated consumers who understand the nature of advertising."[30] Similarly, Sherry et al, in their comparative study of the influence of TV advertising among U.S. and Japanese youth and children, noted that consumption behavior is much more influenced by interaction between parents and their children than by advertising. "Parents play a profound role in the consumer socialization of their children . . . the consumption behavior of adolescents is mediated by communication with parents and is not necessarily triggered by exposure to advertising…."[31]

[30]C. Preston, *The unintended effects of advertising upon children*, INTERNATIONAL JN. OF ADVERTISING, 18, 368, 1999.

[31]Sherry et al, *Orientation to TV advertising among adolescents and children in the U.S. and Japan*, INTERNATIONAL JN. OF ADVERTISING, 18, 235, 1999.

Further, Boush et al,[32] in a study of what adolescents knew about advertiser's intentions, found that children as young as ten were skeptical of television advertisements.

Bergler[33] suggests that what this and other research shows is that:

1) between the ages of four and seven children develop the ability to distinguish between advertising and other types of information;[34]

2) by age six, 57% of children understand that advertising is designed to sell them something;[35]

3) children's acceptance of the value of advertising declines with age;[36]

4) by age nine 41% of children are skeptical of advertising, recognizing its capacity for exaggeration.[37]

One way of supplementing the alleged defects of econometric data is by looking specifically at survey and experimental studies done with youth. The difficulty with these studies is that they often rely on self-reports of

[32]D. Boush et al, *Adolescent skepticism toward TV advertising and knowledge of advertiser tactics*, JN. CONSUMER RESEARCH, 21, 332-341, 1994.

[33]R. Bergler, *The effects of commercial advertising on children*, INTERNATIONAL JN. OF ADVERTISING, 18, 411-425, 1999.

[34]E. Butter et al, *Dissemination of television programs and commercials by preschool children*, JN. ADVERTISING RESEARCH 21, 53-58, 1981. S. Levin et al, *Preschoolers' awareness of television advertising*, CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 53, 933-937, 1982. S. Young, CHILDREN AND TELEVISION ADVERTISING, Oxford University Press, 1990. M. Charlton, *Fernsehwerbung und Kinder: Das Werbeangebot in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und seine Verarbeitung durch Kinder*, 2 BDE. OPLADEN, 1995.

[35]D. Backe and S. Kommer, *Die werbung und die kinder*, MEDIEN UND ERZIEBUNG, 41, 228-234, 1997.

[36]*Ibid.*

[37]*Ibid.*

consumption and report attitudes as opposed to the actual purchase and consumption behaviors captured in econometric studies. Kohn and Smart,[38] for instance, exposed groups of male university students to sports programs, with some programs having no beer advertisements, some four and some nine advertisements. The students were able to purchase beer during the programs. While there were differences in beer consumption during the program, there were no statistically significant differences in beer consumption among the groups by the end of the programs. Lipsitz et al[39] showed groups of fifth- and eighth-grade students three sorts of commercials — beer commercials, soft-drink commercials and beer commercials along with anti-drinking commercials. The students were then asked about their drinking expectancies. The authors found no statistically significant effects from the commercials on drinking expectations.

Strickland[40] administered a self-report questionnaire to a group of seventh, ninth, and eleventh grade students in St. Louis in an effort to examine the relationship between advertising exposure and alcohol consumption. After

[38]P. Kohn and R. Smart, *The impact of television advertising on alcohol consumption: An Experiment*, JN. STUDIES ON ALCOHOL, 45, 295-301, 1984.

[39]A. Lipsitz et al, *Another round for the brewers: Television ads and children's alcohol expectancies*, JN. APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, 23(6) 439, 1993.

[40]D. Strickland, *Alcohol Advertising: Orientations and Influence*, JN. ADVERTISING, 1 307-319, 1982.

analyzing the data, Strickland concluded that "reducing the amount of advertising for alcoholic beverages is likely to have a negligible impact on the level of consumption among teenagers. Given the presumed vulnerability of youth to mass media influences, and especially for those who hold certain susceptible orientations, the findings fail to sustain the argument that alcohol advertising is a primary factor in drinking behavior."[41] Strickland noted that even the small media effects found in the study pointed to the fact, noted above, that parental influences both in socializing children with respect to the media and in consumption decisions were far more crucial in the drinking decision. He also notes the crucial importance of peer influences who "provide the direct incentives and social rewards" for youth drinking behaviors.

These experimental, survey and econometric results are confirmed in a recent analysis of student drug use by my colleague Professor Gerald Wilde of Queens University. Wilde took the data compiled by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto Canada in their Drug Use Among Ontario Students, a survey of the drug use of between 2800 and 4700 students in Grades seven, nine, eleven, and thirteen in odd-numbered years between 1977 and 1999. The survey asked students to indicate the extent to which they used each of sixteen different substances.[42]

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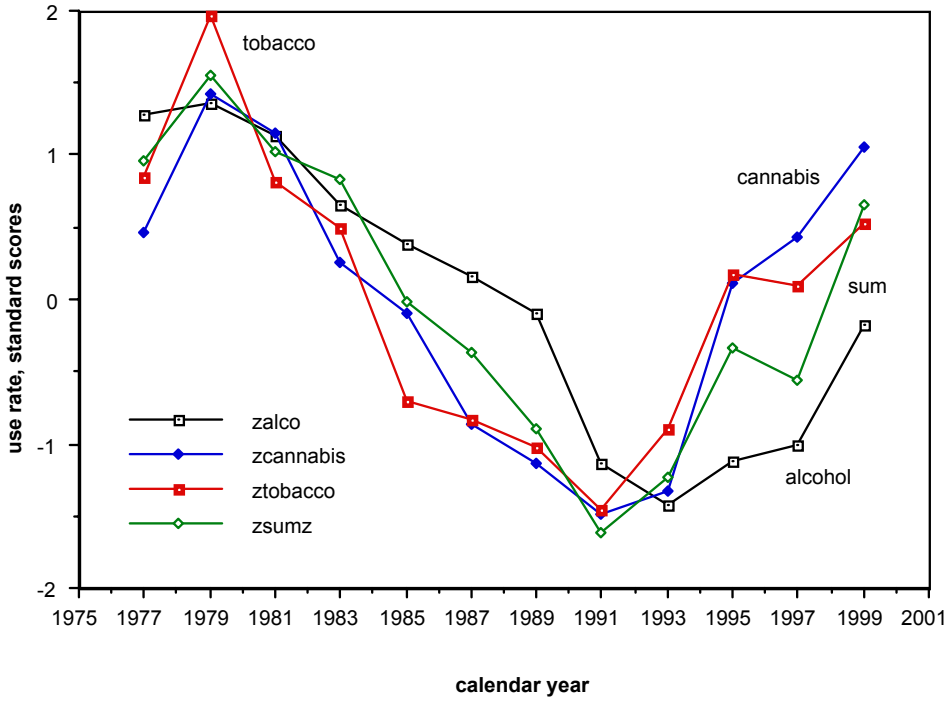
[41] *Ibid.*, 318.

[42] E. Adlaf et al, DRUG USE AMONG ONTARIO STUDENTS: FINDINGS FROM THE OSDUS,

Figure j+2: Rates of use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and aggregate drugs ("sum") by Ontario highschool students, 1977-1999, expressed in standard scores



What Wilde found was a remarkably similar usage pattern across all drugs. From a high in 1977 all drug use declined in tandem until 1991 and then increased through 1999. This similarity can be determined through reliability analysis, factor analysis, multiple regression and analysis of cross-correlations with time lags. According to Wilde's analysis one can predict the usage of any single drug from the use rates of all other drugs with complete precision. In effect, the changes in use of all drugs are caused by some other factor.

These findings have a considerable significance for the alcohol advertising debate with respect to youth. Of the sixteen drugs surveyed over the two decades, only tobacco and alcohol were advertised. Yet usage patterns for

tobacco and alcohol were precisely the same as for unadvertised drugs. Clearly advertising could have been a causal factor in tobacco and alcohol use only if it was a factor in the use of all other drugs, which it was not. Whatever the causes of the usage rates for alcohol, they were not caused by advertising.

The unfortunate consequences of the unjustified policy fixation on alcohol advertising bans extend far beyond the weakening of the public policy process through the championing of policy options that lack credible, rigorous, and consistent evidence and show little rational promise of accomplishing their ends. They extend as well to the fact that bad policy inevitably tends to drive out good policy. By focusing so exclusively on advertising bans as the answer to underage drinking, promising new approaches to youth alcohol use such as the determinants of health models which focuses on such protective factors for substance abuse as keeping young people in school, reducing income disparities, supporting stable home environments and addressing issues of self-esteem and stress, fall off the policy menu. And that is too great a price to pay for bad policy.

