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Selling alcohol to underage adolescents in Romania: compliance with age restrictions in Pitesti

Joris J. van HOOFF*, Marit MOLL**, Dr. Maria CONSTANTINESCU***

Abstract

Aim. To explore the compliance rates of alcohol sales to underage youth (under 18 years old) in Pitesti, Romania.

Method. To investigate compliance rates the method of mystery shopping was conducted. Four underage students (two boys and two girls) visited 58 alcohol sales points in October 2008. The visited alcohol sales points were all located in the six neighbourhoods surrounding the city centre of Pitesti and the city centre itself. The 58 sales points consisted of 8 bars and 50 big and small supermarkets.

Results. All 50 supermarket purchase attempts were successful; the compliance rate with the law is therefore is 0%. Only once a cashier asked the underage mystery shopper for their age, but after lying according to the script (I'm 18 years old), alcohol was sold nonetheless. No differences in successful purchases between boys and girls exist. Also, all eight bar purchase attempts were successful; compliance rate in this sector also turns out to be 0%. Notable fact is that four visited sales points were located near a high school.

Conclusion. Alcohol sales to underage youth turns out to be a major point of concern. Alcohol sales personnel does not comply with age restrictions and therefore intervention by local licensing and control bodies is needed.

Keywords: mystery shopping; adolescent; risk behaviour; alcohol consumption; private drinking places.

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Introduction

Alcohol is the most prevalent substance used among early and late adolescent youth (Hibell et al., 2004; Johnston et al., 2006; Van der Laar et al., 2007). Almost all the teenagers commit at least a delinquency act like: drinking, skipping school, drugs consumption etc. Drinking, especially at an early age, leads to a variety of social and health problems, including problem behaviours, crime, accidents, fights, neurological deficiencies, intoxication, poor school performance and an increased likelihood of later alcohol dependence (Brown et al., 2000; Ellickson et al., 2003; Warner and White, 2003; Tapert, et al., 2003; Sindelar, Barnett & Spirito, 2004; Macdonald, et al., 2005; M. Constantinescu, 2008.). Although the risks of alcohol use in young people are widely acknowledged, underage alcohol consumption has increased considerably in the last decades.

Although Romanian youth is not considered to be heavy drinkers compared to youth in other European countries, still 79% of Romanian youth has consumed alcohol in the past 12 months (Hibell et al, 2000, Hibell et al, 2004). More specific, in Pitesti youth alcohol consumption is a major health concern; only 12 percent of Pitesti youth (from ages 14 to 19) does not drink alcohol, this means that 88 percent of youth drinks alcohol now or has done so in the past. There are more boys than girls drinking, 93 percent of Pitesti boys drink alcohol and 85 percent of girls. Almost 50 percent of boys start drinking before the age of 13 and 22 percent of the girls.

Early onset of alcohol use is a strong predictor for alcohol related health problems and addiction later in life (Dawson et al, 2006, Grant et al, 2001). Youth that starts drinking before the age of 15 has four times more chance to develop alcohol dependence later in life than youth that postpones the initiation of alcohol until the age of 21 (Grant & Dawson, 1997). The concern for the health of the youth of Pitesti, along with the notion that many bars and supermarkets that sell alcohol are located next to schools, has prompted the participation of the city in an international project. The Dutch Romanian Alcohol policy Implementation Network (DRAIN)¹, tries to develop a method for integral alcohol policy based on the theory of the system approach.

The system approach considers alcohol problems to derive from the interaction of the overall alcohol consumption and the demand and supply of alcohol. Alcohol related problems of individuals should therefore be placed in the environment in which an individual lives and all factors that are present there to influence the behaviour of the individual. The most influential factors are the price of alcohol, the assortment of alcohol, the number of alcohol outlets (stores and bars/restaurants/discos), the price of alcohol, the compliance and enforcement of alcohol

¹ The project is financed by the Social Transformation Programme (Matra) of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

legislations (such as the age limit for buying alcohol), the intensity of the marketing of alcohol, social norms and attitudes towards alcohol use and the national alcohol policy (Holder, 1998).

In order for an alcohol prevention policy to be successful the contextual factors need to be taken into account. A successful prevention strategy needs to use proven effective methods and approaches (reducing the availability of alcohol is the most effective method), create awareness of alcohol related issues in the community and support for the policy measures through continuous and intensive media attention. The three building blocks of an effective alcohol prevention policy are: public and political support, compliance to legislations and enforcement of these legislations (Reynolds, 2003).

In line with the system approach, the Pitesti DRAIN project strives to reduce the availability of alcohol for under aged youth and to change the permissive attitude towards youth drinking. To shed more light on the problem of underage alcohol sales, unobtrusive research approaches such as mystery shopping are indispensable. Mystery shopping allows a company or institution to be visited by a trained accomplice, who pretends to be a “normal” customer, but who acts according to a script. Immediately after the visit, a detailed form is completed about the mystery shopper’s experiences. This method is frequently used to investigate the service quality of stores (Finn, Kayande, 1999; Wilson, 2001) and the quality of medical care (Madden et al., 1997; Luck & Peabody, 2002).

In the United Kingdom and especially in the United States, this type of undercover research has also been used to investigate retailers’ compliance with alcohol legislation. The success rates (percentage of purchase attempts which turn out to be successful) of studies in the United States fluctuated between 26% and 97% and appeared to be strongly related to the degree of enforcement involved in the region (e.g., the use of fines or license suspensions) (Preuser, Willimans, 1992; Preuser, Williams, Weinstein, 1994; Wolfson et al., 1996; Freisthler et al., 2003; Wagenaar et al., 2005; Britt et al., 2006). The success rate in the only study in the United Kingdom was 83% (Wilner et al., 2000). In the Netherlands success rates vary from 50% to 95% (e.g. Van Hoof et al., 2007; Van Hoof et al., 2008).

In this article, we report on the development and first use of a mystery shopping protocol to investigate underage alcohol sales in Romanian supermarkets and bars in Pitesti. The method for mystery shopping in Romania, as used in this research project, was largely based on the protocol as developed by the University of Twente in The Netherlands (Gosselt et al, 2007).

Method

Rational

Romanian law forbids the sale of any type of alcohol to youth under the age of 18 (Law no. 61 from 1991, modified and republished on M.O. 387/18.08.2000). In the mystery shopping research in Pitesti four 17 year old students were trained to carry out alcohol purchase attempts in a systematic way to investigate compliance to abovementioned law. The sales persons² do not know the study is conducted, because this may cause them to act different and not the way they would act in real life.

This type of research involves some ethical reflection. Can you include sales personnel in a study without their prior consent? Based on four important criteria in the literature to judge the appropriateness of undercover research approaches, we think it is ethical to run the study: (1) societal relevance of the research topic - underage drinking is seen as an important societal problem in Romania; (2) inadequacy of the more conventional research methods - the contradictory self reports of store managers and adolescents underline the inadequacy of conventional research methods; (3) public nature of the events observed - the interactions between customers and store personnel in supermarkets and liquor stores are public; and (4) avoidance of negative consequences for the research objects - mystery shoppers behave like normal customers and do not demand too much time of the store personnel and we safeguarded the anonymity of all stores and vendors in the study (Denzin & Erikson, 1982; Hodges, 1988; Cassell, 1980; Dench et al., 2004; Gosselt et al., 2007).

Regarding under aged youth partaking in the research as mystery shoppers, two ethical considerations are relevant, since we do not want to encourage them to use alcohol nor do we want them to be confronted with awkward situations, vendor aggression, or police interrogations during the store visits. Therefore the mystery shoppers were personally debriefed about the health risks of alcohol, they carried an official letter stating the research objectives and a researcher was close by to intervene should any trouble arise.

Recruitment of mystery shoppers

Approval of the School inspection is needed to be allowed to select under aged youth to participate in the study. Next two schools are approached with the question to each select two typical 17 year old students for the study, that are able to fulfil the duties of a mystery shopper. Teachers are in daily contact with

² The term sales person refers to the person to which the purchase attempt of the minor was addressed. This may be a cashier, or a bar attendant, but also a location manager or a volunteer.

teenagers in this age group and are therefore able to select teenagers that look like typical 17 year old youth. This prevents the selection of mystery shoppers that look older or younger than their true age, or that are very deviant in their choice of clothing or hairdo. Finally the permission of the parents of the four mystery shoppers is asked, since the students are minors. For their participation in the study the teenagers are rewarded with a small gift, their travel and diner costs are completely covered and they receive a diploma for their contribution.

Corpus

Since the registration of the location and licenses granted to sales points is not available in Pitesti, a sales point random selection strategy is not possible. Therefore the corpus was composed using a “neighbourhood selection strategy”. The six neighbourhoods surrounding the city centre and the city centre itself were selected. In these neighbourhoods the mystery shoppers *randomly* select shops and bars to visit. No attention is paid to expected success rate, type of shop et cetera. Almost all sales points can be visited (if open), as long as they are safe for teenagers and if a teenager does not stand out too much.

Research protocol

A team of mystery shoppers consists of two teenagers (one 17 year old boy and one 17 year old girl) and supervising researchers. On the day prior to the research all four mystery shoppers receive training about the protocols they have to follow and also about the research purposes and alcohol health risks. During the research, each team meets and visits three neighbourhoods by car. Per neighbourhood 5 to 10 shops are visited, and after each shop visit a research form is completed. Finally the team goes to the city centre, where at night time four bars are visited. Visiting a supermarket took about five minutes, visiting a bar about 20 minutes.

In the shops and bars a strict protocol is followed, the basis guidelines are: a mystery shopper acts like “normal customers” and enters the shop (alone). The mystery shopper takes a can of beer (if not available a bottle of beer, or another alcoholic beverage) out of the shelves and goes to the counter to pay. When actually encountering the vendor, the mystery shopper greets them (with “Hello”). If (s)he is asked whether the alcohol is for personal use, the mystery shopper answers affirmatively (with “Yes”). If the mystery shoppers is asked about his/her age, (s)he answers falsely “18 years old” (in line with what a ‘normal under aged customer’ would do). If (s)he is asked for an ID, (s)he would show their real ID. If the store personnel refuses to sell alcohol, the mystery shopper does not insist and leaves the store. If the store personnel sells the alcohol item, the mystery shopper buys the drink and leaves the shop. In bars the same guidelines are followed, only the mystery shoppers go in together (one boy and one girl), and

order drinks the “normal way” in that specific location. When asked for age, they lie and state that they both are 18, when asked for ID, they show their real ID.

After the purchase attempt a checklist is filled out, containing questions regarding the day and time of the visit, the teenager attempting the purchase, the seller and the circumstances at the point of sale³. Also, characteristics of the teenagers that are recorded on the checklist for each sale point are: gender, age, ethnicity and educational level.

Results

In Pitesti 58 alcohol sales points in seven of Pitesti’s neighbourhoods were visited in October 2008. All 58 purchase attempts were successful and therefore compliance with the Romanian law stating that no alcohol can be sold to youth under the age of 18 is 0% (also see table 1).

	Purchase attempts	Successful		Compliance	
		N	%	N	%
Supermarkets	50	50	100%	0	0%
Bars	8	8	100%	0	0%
Total	58	58	100%	0	0%

Table 1. Percentage of successful purchase attempts and compliance

Only in one purchase attempt the sales person asked about the age of the mystery shopper (see table 2). Despite this intervention, the mystery shopper was allowed to buy an alcoholic beverage (after lying about his/her age, as the protocol instructs).

	Purchase attempts	Age		ID		Both	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Supermarkets	50	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%
Bars	8	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total	58	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 2. Number and type of interventions (asking for age and/or ID by alcohol sales personnel)

³ These variables are entered in a regression model to assess whether they influence the compliance with the law banning the sale of alcohol to youth under the age of 18.

Since no variation was found in the success of the purchase attempts or compliance with the law stating that no alcohol can be sold to youth under the age of 18, statistical analysis into the effect of recorded variables is not possible. No effect of age of the sales personnel, size of the outlet, popularity of the outlet or price of the beverage influenced compliance rates in mystery shopping research in other countries (Gosselt et al, 2007, van Hoof et al, 2007, van Hoof et al, 2008).

Conclusions

Compliance rates with the Romanian law that states that no alcohol is allowed to be sold to youth under the age of 18 (Law no. 61 from 1991, modified and republished on M.O. 387/18.08.2000) are 0% in Pitesti. All 58 purchase attempts by mystery shoppers were successful and interventions by alcohol sales persons are rare. Only one sales person asked the age of the mystery shopper, but this did not influence the outcome of the purchase attempt. No differences between boys and girls were found since *all* purchase attempts were successful.

This study gives insight in the situation in Pitesti in the fall of 2008. Based on the outcome of this study, the DRAIN project has formulated the goals to increase the compliance of alcohol sellers with the age limit for alcohol sales. The project strives to enhance the cooperation between licensing and control bodies in the issuing of licenses and to increase the frequency of compliance checks of alcohol sales points by these bodies. A local ordinance stating the consequences of violation of the law needs to be drawn up, specifying the consequences for first time and multiple violations. Alcohol sales persons will be offered a training to learn to detect if youth are under aged and how to refuse service in case of doubt. This will be accompanied by stickers and posters they can put up in their shop, to indicate that they have the intention to not sell alcohol to under aged youth. To determine whether the interventions initiated by the DRAIN project have the desired effect, the mystery shopping research should be repeated at regular intervals.

The data for this research was collected in one Romanian city, but because of the wide variety in Romanian culture, other cities might have different compliance rates. Also, it is interesting to observe if the compliance rate changes when younger children (e.g., 12 or 14) would attempt to purchase alcoholic beverages.

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