Alcohol

EVENTIDE

Refusing to Profit from Misery

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DYLAN WAS A SHY, sensitive boy who loved the animals surrounding his house in Australia.[1] He hated seeing birds in cages; and when he left home and got his own apartment, he fed cockatoos on the balcony. Sometimes he welcomed the fowl into his living room. Dylan was smart, had a mechanical mind, and cared about global events.

Dylan considered alcohol an innocuous way to knock the edge off his anxiety, and among his peers, occasional benders were expected. Dylan began drinking goon (what Australians call boxed wine) because it was sweet, easily available, and inexpensive. One box provided 4 liters of wine for around seven US dollars. 25-30 glasses of wine for the price of a sandwich.

Dylan's alcohol use escalated until he was drinking a box a day, sometimes more. Though he tried to get clean for years, eventually, the alcohol overwhelmed his liver and put him in the hospital. Scared and anguishing, Dylan wanted to warn others of the dangers of alcohol. "If people were aware of what my son and our family went through," Dylan's mom explained, "they might stop to realize just how dangerous these boxes are. It's just too easy to become addicted when alcoholic products are so cheap, and retailers ignore the obvious suffering of customers who come in day after day to buy vast quantities of alcohol."

Soon after the hospital discharged Dylan, his platelets plummeted, and fluid filled his limbs. Dylan died his first night in hospice. He was 26.

"I hate to think of other mothers going through what I've gone through," lamented his heartbroken mother. "Where are the warnings showing the damage that can be caused by consuming alcohol?"[1]

WARNING FLARES

We need all kinds of warnings around alcohol. 400 million people ages 15 and older (7% of the world's population) suffer from alcohol use disorder (AUD)[2]. A recent Surgeon General's advisory highlighted links between alcohol and several types of cancer, especially breast cancer.[3] Alcohol consumption likely contributes to declining brain health.[4] The World Health Organization connects alcohol to "more than 200 diseases, injuries, and health conditions."[5] Purely in economic terms, the CDC estimates excessive alcohol use caused a "drain on the American economy" of $249 billion in only one year.[6]

Alcohol causes 2.6 million deaths every year—that's 4.7% of all deaths (and 13% of fatalities among 20-39-year-olds)[7]. In 2023, 43,000 died from alcohol-related liver disease.[8] In the U.S., 2,200 die annually from alcohol poisoning.[9] Roughly 34 Americans die every day from drunk-driving accidents, a death roughly every 42 minutes.[10]

Alcohol impacts not only those who partake, but the innocent. A staggering 7.5 million children have a parent who suffers from AUD, saddling kids with acute, often lifelong trauma.[11] And 38% of people killed in drunk driving accidents were passengers of the alcohol-impaired drivers, drivers or passengers of another vehicle, or nonoccupants. [12]

Michelle Hawkins and her three children, including 6-year-old Khaiden and 4-year-old Samuel, were driving home from a party unaware of the drunk driver ahead of them. A trash compactor tumbled from the back of the swerving pickup, but the inebriated driver just sped on.[13] Hawkins didn't see the obstacle and slammed into the mangled machinery. Shaken, Hawkins got her children out of the car and to the grass on the roadside.

Moments later, another SUV with *another* drunk driver (blood alcohol at three times the legal limit) slammed through the scene, careened off the road, and struck her entire family.[13] Hawkins woke in the ambulance and learned Khaiden and Samuel were dead. "I won't get their first heartbreak or the first football game or basketball game," Hawkins said. "If they wanted to be doctors or lawyers, I don't get those moments because someone decided to make a decision to get behind the wheel of a car intoxicated."[14]

MONEY FROM MISERY

Scripture offers wine as one of God's gifts, a gift that "gladdens human hearts."[15] Many drink alcohol responsibly, and there may be some positive cardiovascular and/or social benefit from moderate alcohol use (the science is mixed).[16] However, the thorny problem for investors is how the alcohol industry doesn't make its money from responsible, moderate drinkers. The lion's share of profits come

from the heaviest drinkers, from those who are most vulnerable, those struggling with addiction, those poisoning and ravaging their bodies. Alcohol companies make their money off drinkers like Dave, a young man with a history of childhood trauma, who swore his 8 beers-a-night weren't a problem because he still held down a job.[17] And they make money off people like Dylan who can't put down the goon, even with an eviscerated liver. And off drunk drivers, like the two who destroyed the Hawkins family.

England's National Institute of Health reported how roughly 78% of alcohol consumption and 68% of alcohol revenue came from either "hazardous" or "harmful" drinkers.[18] In his book *Paying the Tab*, Duke professor Phillip J. Cook explained how the top 10% of U.S. drinkers account for more than half of alcohol consumed. "...[T]he heaviest drinkers are of greatly disproportionate importance to the sales and profitability of the alcoholic-beverage industry," writes Cook.[19]

The alcohol business thrives while people abuse their products, suffer addiction, and harm themselves and others. One woman, whose alcoholism nearly killed her, shared the pointed truth: "The alcohol industry does not earn most of its revenues and profits from people like (most of) you, i.e., people who enjoy an occasional glass of wine. Rather, they earn most of their profits from the dysfunction, devastation, and death [alcohol] brings to far too many lives. Lives like mine."[20]

AN EXPLOITATIVE COCKTAIL

Relentlessly pursuing higher revenues, the alcohol industry flexes its muscle in exploitative ways. Alcohol companies exert influence over research studying alcohol's effects, spend excessive amounts on marketing to poorer countries, and outlay millions lobbying for relaxed laws and restrictions.[21] They fund education campaigns for "responsible drinking" but obscure their involvement (a potential explanation for why the "responsible" messaging pays scant attention to the one thing we know saves lives: drinking less).[22]

They create products attractive to younger people and those who typically don't like alcohol. Alcopops, for instance, are highly sweetened, soda-like, high-alcohol beverages which researchers say aims for "[a]dolescents and young people...as the primary target group..."[23] With the cheap price, techno and comic-style marketing, and youthful flavors (cherry lime punch, blue raspberry lemonade, and mango punch) masking the alcohol taste,[24] no wonder alcopops are often what underage drinkers reach first.[25] Now, there's supersized alcopops where one can might contain as much alcohol as a sixpack—only the drink's so sugary, like Kool-Aid, it's easy to down several without thinking. Imagine the dangerous cocktail: combining supersized alcopops and underage binge drinking.[26]

We don't want to participate in the exploitation of the vulnerable. We want to invest in good companies producing good products that make the world better.

Because women historically drink less than men, alcohol producers consider them an under-tapped pool of consumers, so, alcohol concocts marketing strategies aimed at women, often appealing to harmful tropes.[27] One health advocacy group charges the industry with "exploit[ing] women's desire for independence, weight control, and glamour, perpetuating harmful associations between their products and these aspirations." Deploying social media influencers, the campaigns target younger women and women in poorer countries. They "pinkwash" profits, donating to breast cancer charities with money made off products contributing to breast cancer.[27]

Over the past few years, stories broke of two beer companies profiting from the oppression of Uyghurs in China.[28] In Uganda (which suffers from "worryingly high levels of alcohol abuse"[29]), the industry derailed the Alcoholic Controls Drink Bill by flooding the public conversation with dubious information.[30] In Ethiopia, a multinational alcohol company displaced a marginalized community of farmers, relying on government force to evict people from their homes and bulldoze their land to make room for a new brewery.[31]

REFUSING DIRTY PROFIT

All this flexing contributes to a massive economic boon. In 2023, economists valued the global alcohol market at $2,313.2 billion.[32] By 2032, economists anticipate revenue from the alcohol market to reach $5,716.2 billion.[33]

Alcohol companies rake in the profits, but so do investors who own shares in these businesses. If an investor buys alcohol stocks or invests in an alcohol-related ETF, their ownership is apparent. However, since large mutual funds are among the top owners of Wall Street's largest alcohol companies (Anheuser-Busch InBev, Diageo, Constellation Brands, etc.), it's easy for investors to own alcohol businesses without knowing where they've put their money.[34]

But once we're clear on all the death and ruin, all the heartache the industry causes, don't we want to make certain we're not enjoying dirty profit? We don't want to participate in the exploitation of the vulnerable. We want to invest in good companies producing good products that make the world better. ●

CITATIONS

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