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### Title

Commentary on Fergie et al. (2019): A new tool for unpacking policy debates over unhealthy commodities

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6p20c79v>

### Journal

Addiction, 114(4)

### ISSN

0965-2140

### Author

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### Publication Date

2019-04-01

### DOI

10.1111/add.14586

Peer reviewed

## Commentary on Fergie *et al.* (2019): A new tool for unpacking policy debates over unhealthy commodities

*Social discourse analysis offers a much-needed tool for researchers to efficiently and systematically compare policy debates internationally and across unhealthy commodities industries.*

In this era of free trade and globalizing industries, commercial interests often dominate debates over regulating legal substances of abuse, such as alcohol and tobacco. In their paper, Fergie *et al.* [1] use a new methodology called 'social discourse analysis' to shed light on one such policy debate, the debate over minimum unit pricing (MUP) for alcohol in Scotland. This method allows the authors to comprehensively map ties between stakeholders in the MUP debate, to analyze their ideological views and to suggest reasons for a successful policy outcome. For many in the addiction field, it will come as little surprise that Fergie *et al.*'s analysis identifies two polarized coalitions: one is comprised of public health advocacy groups, charities, university-based academics and policymakers who favor MUP as a way to reduce alcohol-related harms. The other coalition is comprised of trade organizations and front groups for the alcohol beverage industry, along with economists in think-tanks and politicians who oppose MUP as unnecessary, unfair to consumers and paternalistic.

In this Commentary, I argue that social discourse analysis offers a promising tool for moving our field beyond studies of isolated policy debates, and towards more systematic international comparisons and comparisons across substances of abuse. Transnational corporations marketing 'unhealthy commodities' have come to dominate trade around the globe [2,3]. A shrinking number of globalized firms use the same set of strategies to influence policy [4]. They are growing more dominant through horizontal integration across markets and product lines: transnational tobacco conglomerates have acquired alcohol and sugar-sweetened beverage subsidiaries, while alcohol and other beverage corporations are expanding their markets with cannabis-infused soda and beer [5–7]. Now more than ever, researchers need methodological tools to efficiently map multiple policy debates in ways that shed light on their commonalities and interconnections.

Social discourse analysis combines two methods—content analysis and social network analysis—to yield quantitative data sets that reliably capture the universe of key participants in a debate and their views [8]. The analyst starts by drawing a representative sample of news media stories covering the debate—something easily done using the LexisNexis database. Statements about the policy are extracted from the news stories and coded on

four simple characteristics: who made the statement, what was said, whether the statement was positive or negative and the day the statement was made. Once entered into a computer file using open-source software [9], the analyst can map social network ties, alliances, positions and ideological claims. It becomes possible to draw inferences about underlying constructs, such as popularity and reciprocity between actors in the network, and to observe changes in alliances over time. Because this approach has a good chance of capturing all or most key participants, it is possible to identify stakeholders who are not polarized, and therefore might be influenced by objective scientific evidence.

Social discourse analysis offers advantages over established methodologies both in scientific rigor and efficiency. Policy researchers tend to either focus on the coalitions formed around a policy (the social network) or on the frames and ideologies driving the debate (the discourse). Social discourse analysis combines the two, illuminating their interplay over time. It also offers efficiencies over established methodologies. Surveys of policy networks are expensive and time-consuming, and often rely upon snowball sampling, which may fail to capture all stakeholders participating in the debate. Without a complete sample of participants, it becomes difficult to accurately map network ties. Another common approach—the qualitative analysis of key informant interviews and/or media coverage—requires time-consuming transcription, coding and qualitative analysis and, again, may fail to represent all the key stakeholders if snowball sampling is incomplete.

Firms that promote unhealthy commodities are increasingly globalized, are horizontally integrating into new markets and use similar strategies to influence policy debates. There is a need for efficient, systematic, rigorous research methodologies that allow us to compare policy debates internationally and across multiple substances of abuse. Because policy debates over unhealthy commodities are so often polarized, and because they share so many common social network and ideological characteristics, social discourse analysis is likely to prove a particularly valuable tool for international and comparative research.

### Declaration of interests

L.A.S. is an Assistant Editor of *Addiction*. No other competing interests.

**Keywords** Alcohol and drugs, alcohol control policy, discourse analysis, global health policy, policy research methods, social network analysis.

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Submitted 4 February 2019; final version accepted 13 February 2019

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