



'Peeling Back the Label' - Alcohol Advertising & Young People!



By Derek Steenholdt – Research Officer
A synoptic look at evidence of alcohol advertising impact on
adolescent drinking behaviours.

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Report Title: Young people and alcohol advertising

What is the impact of alcohol marketing on youth?

Alcohol marketing is a global phenomenon in which companies spend considerable sums to establish and embed their brands in the lives and lifestyles of populations. Global spending on alcohol advertising of six of the largest alcohol producers, mostly concentrated in Europe and the United States, totalled more than US\$2 billion in 2006.¹

A thorough review of worldwide longitudinal research has concluded that exposure to alcohol marketing:

1. Reduces the age at which young people start to drink,
2. Increases the likelihood they will drink and
3. Increases the amount of alcohol they will consume once they have started to drink.²

Compared to other European countries, young people in the UK have by far the most positive expectations of alcohol and are least likely to feel it will cause them harm. Serious consequences are becoming more evident in the UK as a result of more young people drinking alcohol with alcohol-related hospital admissions increasing by 32% between 2002 and 2007. Between 2002 and 2009, 92,220 under 18's were admitted to hospital in England for alcohol related problems – that is over 36 children or young people each day!³

For the most part, this advertising is targeting young adults at the legal drinking age (i.e. 18 in the UK and 21 in US). However, younger people are exposed to these promotions. Investigations into alcohol marketing companies have shown 15 and 16 year olds are being used to guide campaign development and there is a clear acknowledgement that particular products appeal to children (e.g. in the UK, "Lambrini" is referred to by a marketing company memo as a "kids' drink"). Companies are strategic in their advertising and have identified university students as a particularly promising market segment – as one Smirnoff presentation expresses it – a *"great place to create excitement and drive recruitment is within a student community"*.⁴ There is always the potential for such persuasive advertising to appeal and capture the imagination and aspirations of a slightly younger audience.

Dr Smyth, a consultant psychiatrist who runs the Youth Drug and Alcohol Service in Dublin, Ireland recently conducted a "snapshot" survey of alcohol usage among 34 adolescents aged between 14 and 18 who were entering treatment for drug or alcohol abuse. Dr Smyth, a co-author of the survey reported that the most popular drinks of these heavy drinkers were Budweiser (50%) and Smirnoff (27%) and not the cheaper brands as might be expected.

Dr Smyth is quoted in the Irish Examiner (13 October 2011) as stating:

"What was unexpected and most interesting was the level of brand loyalty. The stereotypical view of heavy drinkers is that they would be drinking Dutch Gold, that kind of thing, but they are drinking the more established brands."

He said this indicated problem drinkers were not driven by the cheapest or strongest drinks.

"They are drawn to branding and promotion and that's down to advertising. It is yet more evidence that alcohol advertising and sponsorship needs to be seriously restricted."

He said a "frightening" finding was that more than 11% of respondents under 18 said their parents bought them alcohol. He said the average age at which participants first drank was 13, compared to 14-15 for the general population. ⁵

How are young people exposed to alcohol marketing?

Any child with access to the Internet can instantly view alcohol-related advertising. Recent UK research has shown that an average of 6% of views of adult oriented content on YouTube are made by 13 to 17 year olds. For example, if a beer or spirits commercial has had 10 million views on YouTube, an average of 600,000 children under the age of 17 will have seen it. Of real concern is that many of these alcohol promotions link booze to sports, music celebrities and advertisements promoting alcohol as "cool".⁶

Youth exposure to alcohol advertising on U.S. television increased 71 percent between 2001 and 2009, which is much more than the increase in exposure of adults aged 21 and above. Furthermore, exposure of youth (aged 12 to 20) to all distilled spirits TV advertising was 30 times greater in 2009 than in 2001, driven mainly by the rise of distilled spirits advertising on cable television, and by 2009 a majority of alcohol advertising on cable TV was occurring at programming times when youth were more likely to be viewing than adults 21 years or older.⁷

Popular music is another form of media through which young people are exposed to references to alcohol. This can take the form of a coincidental reference to an alcoholic beverage or to a more deliberate naming of an alcohol brand or product. Having undertaken a study of 793 contemporary popular U.S. songs, a research team recently found one in five songs sampled had explicit references to alcohol and of these, one quarter mentioned a specific alcohol brand. These alcohol brand appearances are associated commonly with a luxury life-style characterized by wealth, sex, partying and other drugs. The research team estimated that the average US adolescent is exposed daily to 34 references to alcohol in popular music.⁸ We should hardly be surprised that the vast majority of young people in the economically developed countries are keen to imbibe socially and perceive consuming alcohol as an integral and essential part of their lifestyles.

Responses to an on-line "Alcohol Ads and You" survey by more than 2,300 children and young people in the UK and Wales, show that overall, under 18's are not fully aware that some forms of 'below the line' alcohol promotion are in fact advertising the use of alcohol. For example,

- Only 48.6% recognised that joining a Facebook group for an alcohol product was marketing alcohol
- Only 50.4% recognised sponsorship of sports team shirts as alcohol marketing (note: young people who own alcohol merchandise such as T-shirts and baseball caps are 1.5 times more likely to try drinking alcohol than those who don't)
- Only 48.3% recognised a festival named after a product as alcohol marketing
- Only 51% recognised a piece of alcohol product merchandise as alcohol marketing
- Only 43.4% recognised brand ambassadors (people paid to promote brands at events) as alcohol marketing⁹

“Advertising sends a powerful message to kids that drinking is something everyone needs to do to have fun and lots of friends...It can be difficult for parents to be heard over that message.”¹⁰

Prof Sandra Jones, Director of the Centre for Health Initiatives at the University of Wollongong

How do the alcohol marketing companies manage to get under the radar?

While most advertising protocols do not allow advertisers to suggest alcohol can enhance social success of either an individual or an event, corporate documentation has been revealed that is full of references to brands doing both things. Terms like “social glue” and enhancing sociability with suggestions that a particular brand is “the perfect way to start the night” or “make the night sparkle” are implying social success.

Another approach, although outlawed in some countries, is to suggest alcohol can enhance masculinity or femininity. For example, a key communication objective for the WKD brand notes the need to “communicate maleness and personality” or, in other brands, use of terms in advertisements such as “urbane”, “masculine” and “charismatic” along with pictures of George Clooney, Bono and Ewan McGregor.

Producers are also well aware that some market segments do drink irresponsibly and campaign briefs abound with references to “unwise”, and “immoderate” drinking and producers position their brand so that consuming their product can “crank up the evening” or “getting drunk with less volume of liquid”.

While sponsorship is not specifically addressed by advertising codes, it is a large and powerful part of alcohol promotion. It raises brand awareness, creating positive brand attitudes and building emotional connections with consumers. Sponsorship with football, lad magazines and music festivals are often intended to reach the young by demonstrating how the brand understands and relates to young people.

New media and social networking sites are fast growing channels for alcohol advertising. Websites, email, viral marketing (eg. encouraging young people to pass on messages to friends), Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other forms of new media offer alcohol producers ways to engage with consumers more

interactively and freedom. Guidelines and restrictions are far more difficult to monitor and impose by external authorities.

Even the requirement for entering an alcohol web site by providing an adult date of birth on an age verification page can be easily circumvented by young people entering a false date of birth, as no other evidence is required.

In their concluding remarks on the matter of regulatory failures in the area of restrictions on alcohol marketing, Hastings et al having undertaken research for the House of Commons Health Select Committee noted that “producers and agencies can exploit the ambiguities in the codes and push the boundaries of both acceptability and adjudication” and “the self-regulatory codes do not protect young people, they just hone the advertiser’s skills – either in camouflage or creativity.”⁴

This can be seen in the findings of recent research undertaken by RMIT University showing how alcohol companies are employing social media platforms and digital media to leverage their sponsorship of sport while formally admitting it’s not permissible to promote alcohol to youth, and all marketing regulations prohibit the promotion of alcohol to the young.

Westberg K. et al report many alcohol sponsors of major sports, (especially AFL, NRL, cricket) typically employ Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and apps to embrace engage closely with consumers and have consumers embrace brands. What the researchers found was that, in real time, through social media and digital media, alcohol sponsors of sport use four distinct communications strategies or ‘calls’ on consumers of sport and social media: to compete, to collaborate, to celebrate and to consume.

- The **call to compete** engages consumers to compete with and against their friends and others to win a prize, frequently alcohol or alcohol branded;
- In the **call to collaborate** consumers are engaged by alcohol brands to co-create content (e.g. images and comments) that is shared on digital sites owned by the brand and can be co-posted on the consumer’s digital platforms, thereby disseminating the brand throughout the consumers’ personal and social networks;
- The **call to celebrate** requires the consumer to drink alcohol while basking in the reflected glory of sporting success;
- The **call to consume alcohol** normalises drinking as an integral part of the sports experience during the contest or game and afterwards, regardless of whether the team wins or loses.

These strategies normalise the connection of alcohol with sport, urge consumers to identify closely with alcohol brands, expose people of all ages to relentless promotion of drinking, and fail to offer any real protection of exposure to young people. The RMIT report also shows how children are caught up in the embrace of alcohol marketing via social media at alcohol sponsored sport events.

What do young people want?

On a more positive note, what the “Alcohol Ads and You” survey did show was that under-18’s feel strongly about the levels of alcohol marketing to which they are exposed and want regulation that provides stronger protection. The vast majority do recognise alcohol advertising using traditional media channels. While they do not want to interfere with advertisers reaching adult audiences, they do want more robust regulation than currently exists. For example:

- 60% want alcohol advertising in the cinema restricted to 18-certificate films only and 12% want alcohol advertising in cinemas banned altogether
- 58% want alcohol advertising on television limited to after 9pm watershed and 10% want TV advertising banned altogether (Note: it is estimated that 1.6 million children and young people aged 4 – 15 years old were exposed to alcohol advertising during a single game of the televised football of the last World Cup)
- 59% want alcohol promotion limited only to the areas of supermarkets selling alcohol and 9% want it banned altogether in supermarkets and off-licences
- 61% want alcohol ads on the Internet banned from websites aimed at children and young people and 14% want it banned from all websites

A significant majority of the more than 2,300 young respondents to the on-line alcohol ads survey support the need for health warnings about the risks of alcohol.

- 70% of female respondents want clear labels with information about health risks on all bottles and cans
- 70% of all respondents 11 years and under support a short health warning at the end of each TV, radio and cinema advert.
- The majority of all young respondents believe that government should have greater oversight of alcohol promotion regulation and that the alcohol industry should pay to health messages about alcohol. ^{3,8}

How can we respond to this appalling exposure of our youth to alcohol marketing?

There does not appear to be any silver bullet which will reduce our youth to unwanted and inappropriate exposure to alcohol marketing. Areas which need to be addressed:

- ✓ Government regulatory frameworks need to be reviewed for their efficacy, taking into account the many forms of marketing established and particularly those emerging through new media and social networking.
- ✓ An educational program targeting the young with health messages relating to the risks associated with consuming alcohol need to be more prominent in the media to contrast with the existing promotional images of alcohol which encourage them to drink and to start drinking earlier and to

drink more when they do. To quote one 15 year old responding to the on-line survey *'both my parents are alcoholics, you should put them in an ad so no one would drink.'*

- ✓ Children and young people's views need to be incorporated into the government and regulatory body decision making mechanisms in order to better respond to the expressed and perceived needs of young people.
- ✓ Along with above, The Dalgarno Institute recommend more prolific and heavily promoted prevention focused measures, which should include...

- a) Advertising bans at all sporting events*
- b) Advertising bans on all Broadcast media*
- c) Promotion of social media which warns of risks associated with alcohol consumption*
- d) Health warning labels on all alcohol products*
- e) Raising Minimum Legal Drinking Age to 21*
- f) Far fewer liquor licences and outlets*
- g) Tougher penalties for sales of liquor to under age individuals*
- h) Town planning measures in growth areas and socio-economically disadvantaged areas be taken to maximise i) the delay of alcohol uptake, ii) the marginalising of alcohol use and iii) alcohol free precincts.*

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