

ALCOHOL MARKETING AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and young people constitute an important target group for the alcohol industry because they represent the market of tomorrow, the drinkers of the future. Creating brand allegiance among children and young people is an investment the industry is sure to cash in on later.

Alcohol Advertising

Content analyses of the appealing features used in alcohol advertisements suggest that drinking is portrayed as being an important part of sociability, physical attractiveness, masculinity, romance, relaxation and adventure. Many alcohol advertisements use humour, rock music, animation, image appeals, celebrity endorsement and animal characters, which increase their popularity with underage television viewers (Chen, M. J. et al, 2005). Not surprisingly, alcohol commercials are among the most likely to be remembered by teenagers and most frequently mentioned as their favourites.

A recent study of the impact of alcohol advertising on teenagers in Ireland (Dring & Hope, 2001) found that:

- Alcohol advertisements were identified as their favourites by the majority of those surveyed
- Most of the teenagers believed that the majority of the alcohol advertisements were targeted at young people. This was because the advertisements depicted scenes – dancing, clubbing, lively music, wild activities - with which young people could identify,
- The teenagers interpreted alcohol advertisements as suggesting -contrary to the code governing alcohol advertising- that alcohol is a gateway to social and sexual success and as having mood altering and therapeutic properties.

Also, children are aware of alcohol advertising and find such commercials attractive. For example, according to a survey carried out by the Center on Alcohol Advertising, elementary school children are more familiar with the Budweiser frogs than they are with cartoon cereal characters such as Tony the Tiger (Centre Marketing Advertising, USA).

By definition, alcohol advertising is one-sided and presents alcohol consumption as a safe and problem-free practice, de-emphasizing the potential health risks and negative consequences. Through its messages, alcohol advertising maintains the social desirability of drinking, overlooks the risk of alcohol to individual and public health, and contradicts prevention objectives.

Both, article 15 and 3 g (e) of the new AVMS Directive, seek to protect minors by prohibiting the specific targeting of minors. However the ubiquity of alcohol advertising means that it can hardly be missed by them. Indeed, the reality is that, regardless of whether alcohol advertisements are specifically targeting minors, children and young people are still aware of them and tend to remember them.

A growing body of research shows that exposure to and enjoyment of alcohol commercials cause minors to develop more positive expectancies and attitudes towards alcohol, which in turn influences the onset of drinking age, as well as patterns and levels of alcohol consumption.

The relationship between alcohol marketing and alcohol consumption is rather complex and the scientific debate is still heated. Most of the research focuses on the impact of alcohol advertisement rather than the cumulative effect of alcohol marketing.

Most econometric studies provide little evidence of an effect of alcohol advertising (Hastings et al.,

2005). These studies generally look at the expenditure on advertising in a given market and the effect that has on the sales of alcoholic beverages. These econometric studies, however, tell us nothing about the effect of marketing on youngsters, since all conclusions are drawn at the population level.

Observational studies have been used to study the differences within a specific age group. These studies have examined whether a higher exposure to alcohol marketing (advertisement) increases alcohol consumption among adolescents. Studies with a structural equation models sometimes find a reciprocal effect between exposure to alcohol advertisement and alcohol use; heavy drinkers are often more aware of alcohol advertisements and appreciate these advertisement more.

It is important to examine the effects of alcohol marketing through longitudinal studies in order to establish causality (Smith & Foxcroft, 2007).

Longitudinal studies mainly conducted in New Zealand (eg Connolly et al., 1994; Casswell & Zhang, 1998) and the US (eg Collins et al., 2007; Ellickson et al. 2005, Fisher et al., 2007; Stacy et al., 2004) consistently suggest that **exposure to alcohol advertisement is associated with the likelihood of adolescents to start to drink alcohol** (Sargent et al., 2006; Fisher et al., 2007), and with increased drinking amongst baseline drinkers (Snyder et al., 2006; Stacy et al., 2004;).

Alcohol Marketing and ‘new media’

The research shows that the effect of less traditional types of marketing practices is even greater.

A recent longitudinal study shows that the effect of possessing a promotional item is bigger than exposure to televised or printed alcohol advertisement (Collins et al. 2007).

Alcohol use in movies is also found to be a predictor of prevalence and initiation of alcohol use (Sargent et al., 2006). A study with a cross-sectional design by McClure et al (2006) comes to similar conclusions. Hastings et al. (2005) argue that the effects found in these studies are possibly underestimating the true size of the effects since **in reality alcohol advertisers use a combination of different marketing strategies.**

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