

Advertising: Alcohol

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Although people have been drinking alcohol for many centuries, the promotion of alcohol started only relatively recently (between 1850 and 1900). Nowadays, advertising for alcoholic beverages is widespread and has increased over the past years (Noel, Babor, & Robaina, 2017). Just turn on the TV to stumble upon a Desperados commercial, watch the newest James Bond movie where 007 drinks Heineken, or open Instagram to see your favorite influencer promoting a Bacardi-sponsored event. The occurrence and effects of alcohol marketing have been the focus of many studies. Some conclusions are nowadays supported by much literature (e.g., that alcohol marketing has a causal effect on increased drinking behavior); however, some topics are still understudied (e.g., the effects of new forms of marketing or effects among certain risk groups). In this entry, we aim to provide insight into what is known on this topic, and what should be explored more in the future. We will discuss the current body of knowledge about:

1. Exposure to alcohol advertising.
2. Effects of alcohol advertising in general, and specifically among specific vulnerable groups.
3. Exposure to social media alcohol advertising.
4. Effects of social media alcohol advertising.
5. Directions for future research.

Exposure to alcohol advertising

Many studies, meta-analyses, systematic reviews, and even reviews of reviews have been published in this domain. Noel and colleagues (2017) wrote a review article about the content of and exposure to alcohol marketing. Based on 57 studies (conducted in 18

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countries) that investigated exposure to alcohol marketing, they concluded that young people are often exposed to alcohol marketing, which takes place via various channels (such as TV, radio, print, digital, outdoor), and that the level of exposure has increased over the past years.

In this same review article, the content of alcohol marketing was also investigated. It was found that humor, relaxation, and friendship are frequently addressed strategies within alcohol advertisements. Despite regulation and legislation in various countries, the content of alcohol advertising seems specifically designed to be attractive to young people. For example, advertising in public outdoor spaces near schools used content aimed at young people (utilizing elements such as cartoons). Lastly, it was concluded that advertising codes (e.g., that alcohol marketing should not target young people) are often violated. That is, TV advertising violated guidelines in 12–86% of the cases (compared to 0–52% in magazines), and one study showed that 74% of digital marketing violated the guidelines. The most commonly violated codes were those specifically intended to protect young people.

Effects of alcohol advertising

The important question then arises: does this exposure to alcohol advertising lead to an increase in alcohol consumption? Or is it perhaps the case that frequent drinkers report more alcohol marketing, which is often the opinion vocalized by the alcohol industry? This causality question has received a lot of scientific attention. We highlight two important review papers.

In 2020, Sargent and Babor wrote a review of reviews that focused on the influence of alcohol marketing and alcohol use among young people. This most complete and comprehensive review study of the relationship between alcohol marketing and underage drinking to date concludes that the current scientific research makes it possible to conclude that there is a causal relationship between exposure to alcohol marketing and drinking alcohol at an early age. They base this conclusion on four thorough systematic literature reviews (of a total of 420 scientific publications), and seven other reviews (which analyzed 145 previous studies in 37, mostly Western, countries).

Similarly, Jernigan and colleagues (2017) conducted a systematic review of 12 longitudinal studies including in total over 35,000 minors from Europe, Asia, and North America. Evidence of a positive relationship between exposure to alcohol marketing and alcohol consumption among minors was found across all 12 studies. Based on this, the researchers concluded that greater exposure to alcohol marketing among young people leads to subsequent alcohol consumption, binge drinking, and hazardous drinking behavior.

Vulnerable groups

Many of the previously mentioned studies focused specifically on the vulnerable group of young people. However, there are other vulnerable risk groups that should be protected from the harmful effects of alcohol marketing.

Heavy and hazardous drinkers. That alcohol marketing has been shown to increase drinking behavior, often among young people, has been demonstrated in many studies. However, some studies also exist showing that alcohol marketing increases heavy and hazardous drinking among adult populations. For example, Stautz and colleagues (2017) confirm earlier studies on the impact of alcohol advertising, by focusing on predictors of alcohol use in a lab study among adult heavy drinkers. They found that exposure to a single alcohol advertising message led to positive feelings about alcohol and tendencies to approach (instead of avoid) alcohol. It thus appears that alcohol marketing can lead to hazardous drinking in adults. Several authors have therefore suggested that stricter regulations may be needed to protect heavy alcohol users from the effects of alcohol advertising. Evidence also suggests that other risk groups (i.e., people with alcohol dependence or in recovery) are especially susceptible to alcohol marketing (Babor et al., 2017).

Alcohol dependence. In Babor and colleagues' (2017) review paper, the authors stress that people with a history of alcohol dependence appear especially vulnerable to alcohol marketing and that alcoholics and other heavy drinkers should be treated as a vulnerable population in the context of alcohol marketing. Furthermore, based on their study on the effects of alcohol ads among different populations, Noel, Xuan, and Babor (2019; see further reading) also underline the idea that people with alcohol dependence may be vulnerable to alcohol advertising by suggesting that alcohol stimuli in alcohol ads may serve as a cue to drink.

Adults in recovery. Several studies highlight that especially adults in recovery may have trouble resisting the persuasive effects of alcohol marketing. These studies show that alcohol advertising images can trigger drinking among adults in recovery, that the persistent availability of alcohol marketing is a risk of relapsing, and that certain alcohol ads contain elements that relate directly to problematic modes of experiences for people in recovery. To highlight one of these studies, Thomson, Bradley, and Casswell (1997) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed how recovering alcoholics experienced alcohol marketing. Most adults reported feeling angry (that alcohol was portrayed as something positive) and tempted ("these ads trigger old feelings"; p. 141).

The abovementioned findings imply that vulnerable groups should be protected from alcohol marketing. Although practically it could be an enormous challenge to achieve complete protection since these people are embedded in the regular population, efforts should still be made to explore the possibilities to protect these, and other groups (e.g., pregnant women), from the harmful effects of alcohol marketing.

Exposure to social media alcohol advertising

As mentioned, alcohol marketing can take place via different channels. Nowadays, much advertising takes place online, and especially social media alcohol marketing is on the rise. Various surveys show that 20–25% of young participants interact with alcohol marketing on social media, such as tagging an alcohol brand in a photo, liking posts of alcohol brands, or by clicking on a link to events of alcohol brands (e.g., Jones et al., 2016).

Focusing on YouTube, Primack et al. (2017) analyzed 137 videos that were popular among minors and that contained alcohol brands. They found that these 137 videos generated enormous amounts of views (they were watched over 96 million times), likely with a large proportion of those viewers being minors. This led the researchers to conclude that videos with alcohol marketing are heavily viewed among underage people, and that interventions are needed to regulate the presence of alcohol marketing on YouTube.

Alcohol marketing on social media can clearly come from a particular alcohol brand (e.g., if it is posted on the brand's channel, or labeled as an #ad), but it can also be unclear who the actual creator of a particular message is. So-called social media "influencers" (i.e., popular individuals on social media with a substantial number of followers) can display alcohol brands as well, making it unclear who initiated or commissioned these posts and whether these influencers have been paid or otherwise compensated. Hardly any scientific research has been published on the role of influencers in alcohol marketing. However, a recent study by Hendriks and colleagues (2020) investigated how often influencers posted alcohol-promoting posts, and how clearly identifiable sponsorship of these posts was. They showed that around 60% of the influencers posted about alcohol, and approximately 20% of the alcohol-related posts displayed a specific alcohol brand. However, it was often not clearly indicated if and to what extent the brand was involved in the creation of the post (i.e., only 33.3% of branded posts used a sponsorship disclosure such as "#ad").

Effects of social media alcohol advertising

Several systematic literature reviews have revealed an association between exposure to digital alcohol advertising on alcohol consumption. For example, a systematic analysis of 25 studies, among adolescents and adults, showed that the interaction with online alcohol marketing (on social media, on websites, and in apps) is positively correlated with alcohol consumption (Noel, Sammartino, & Rosenthal, 2020). Moreover, multiple cross-sectional studies have shown that exposure to alcohol advertisements through social media positively correlates with alcohol consumption, problematic/risky drinking behavior, and binge drinking. It is important to note, however, that most studies focusing on social media alcohol advertising are cross-sectional, making causal inferences on the impact of social media advertising difficult (i.e., does exposure to alcohol advertising cause people to drink more, or do people who drink more view and report more alcohol advertisements?). Although research on offline alcohol marketing has clearly indicated a causal effect (Jernigan et al., 2017; Sargent & Babor, 2020), further research on the effects of social media alcohol advertising is needed to see if this also applies in online contexts.

There is thus evidence for the association between alcohol advertising on social media and alcohol consumption; however, there is also some evidence for social media effects on determinants of alcohol consumption (e.g., affective and cognitive responses). Several studies showed that alcohol advertising on social media influenced affective responses (i.e., emotions and attitudes). For example, Stautz and colleagues

(2017) showed that alcohol advertising via the official YouTube accounts of alcohol brands evoked positive feelings (pleasure and arousal) among heavy drinkers. Furthermore, some studies have examined the effects of social media alcohol advertising on cognitive responses (e.g., memory and perceptions). That is, survey research has shown that the content from alcohol advertisements on social media is especially well remembered by young people and experimental research has shown that exposure to alcohol advertising through an alcohol brand's own social media channels was associated with an implicit and automatic tendency to approach alcohol (Stautz et al., 2017).

In sum, research has shown positive associations between alcohol advertising on social media on the one hand and increased alcohol consumption and affective and cognitive responses on the other hand. Further research is needed, however, on the causality of these relationships.

Conclusion and future research

A large majority of the scientific literature (described in several systematic reviews and meta-analyses) found clear relationships between alcohol marketing and alcohol consumption. Most of these studies focused on minors and young adults. The criticism from the alcohol industry, supported by some published studies, is that there is indeed a correlation but no causal relationship between alcohol marketing and drinking behavior. They argue that young people who already drink are also more interested in alcohol marketing (and report it more), and that it is not the case that alcohol marketing is the cause of (underage) drinking. However, scientific meta-analyses published in recent years are very clear: alcohol marketing causes alcohol use.

This question of causality is of great importance because society-wide decisions about alcohol marketing legislation and regulations were always made with this question in mind. Although most countries have some form of restrictive regulation and legislation related to alcohol marketing, countries differ in how strict or loose these rules are. For example, in some countries, all forms of alcohol marketing (including social media ads, or 0.0 marketing) are forbidden, whereas other countries rely more on self-regulation by the alcohol industry. We argue that, with the current, state-of-the-art evidence described in this entry, better and stricter choices can be made that positively affect people's health, well-being, and mortality rates. It is not only possible, but even necessary – similar to a topic such as climate change – that governmental structures make informed decisions based on the latest scientific evidence.

Even if it is claimed that alcohol marketing does not target groups at risk such as minors, if a causal link between alcohol marketing and drinking behavior among vulnerable groups is probable, action has to be taken, according to several of the researchers mentioned in this entry. At times it has been mentioned that more longitudinal or experimental studies are needed to answer the question of causality. However, in response, we highlight here the study by Jernigan and colleagues (2017) who reviewed large and relevant longitudinal studies that focused on exactly this issue. The final conclusion of their paper is – again – that greater exposure to alcohol

marketing among young people has a causal effect on alcohol consumption, binge drinking, and hazardous drinking behavior.

Other foci of interest deserve more scientific attention. First, although we highlighted some studies on risk groups other than young people (i.e., people with alcohol dependence or in recovery from addiction; e.g., Noel et al., 2019; see further reading), the number of studies focusing on these at-risk groups is still limited. Furthermore, another risk group that has received almost no scientific scrutiny are pregnant and breastfeeding women. This is unfortunate, because effects of alcohol use during these periods can be very harmful. We therefore advise future researchers to provide further insight into the effects of alcohol marketing among these vulnerable groups.

Second, the advertising landscape has changed over the past years. Our online world now provides ample new opportunities to advertise for alcoholic beverages, for example by using (constantly evolving) social media channels, as well as social media influencers. Furthermore, recently new products have gained in popularity, such as nonalcoholic drinks (0.0%) or hard seltzers. Although these products often claim to be “healthy” alternatives, the effects of advertising for these products remain uncertain. Do advertisements for Heineken 0.0% drinks only influence attitudes, intentions, and behaviors related to this specific alcohol-free drink or brand? Or are there spillover effects on the brand Heineken itself, which as a consequence also increases alcohol use in general? It is essential that effects of these new forms of alcohol marketing are researched thoroughly.

Acknowledgment

This entry is partly based on a Dutch review paper written for the Dutch government (Ministry of VWS). Please see the following reference: Van Hoof, J. J., Hendriks, H., Noort, P. D., Van Eck, J. M., Basemans, S. E., Pieterse, M. E., Walet, M., & Van Reijmersdal, E. A. (2020). *Knowledge Syntheses Alcohol Marketing. Literature research into the impact and effect of alcohol marketing on problematic alcohol use in response to the Dutch National Prevention Agreement [Kennissynthese Alcoholmarketing. Literatuuronderzoek naar de impact en het effect van alcoholmarketing op problematisch alcoholgebruik naar aanleiding van het Nationaal Preventieakkoord 2018]*. Universiteit Twente: Enschede.

SEE ALSO: Advertising: Food and Nonalcoholic Beverages; Advertising: Over-the-counter Drugs; Advertising: Prescription Drugs; Advertising: Tobacco; Pharmaceutical Advertising; Social Media: Adolescent Health.

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