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Mass media and advertising – adolescents and alcohol

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Introduction

Recent studies, reviewed here by Dr Geoff Lowe, are emphasising the need to protect young people from exposure to alcohol advertising. A fact recognised by voluntary company codes of practice and codes for drinks sectors that stipulate that 70% of the programme viewers where alcohol is advertised should be over the legal drinking age.

The monitoring of alcohol advertising is addressed in a number of ways, particularly in relation to the protection of children and minors. There are voluntary codes developed by advertising self-regulatory organisations, social aspect organisations and individual company codes.

Many codes, such as the Portman Group code (UK), The Beer Institute and DISCUS Code (US) are reinforced with independent complaints panels, whereby the public can submit complaints concerning inappropriate advertising or marketing.

Watchdogs and regulatory frameworks, such as the EU 'Audio visual directive' lie above the self-regulatory codes. In some countries, such as Finland the regulations

are so strict that self-regulation is not necessary.

Article 15 of the EU Audio visual directive states that advertising for alcoholic beverages

- may not be aimed specifically at minors or, in particular, depict minors consuming these beverages;
- may not link the consumption of alcohol to enhanced physical performance or to driving;
- may not create the impression that the consumption of alcohol contributes towards social or sexual success;
- may not claim that alcohol has therapeutic qualities or that it is a stimulant, a sedative or a means of resolving personal conflicts;
- it shall not encourage immoderate consumption of alcohol or present abstinence or moderation in a negative light;
- may not place emphasis on high alcoholic content as being a positive quality of the beverages.

Most codes and guidelines from around the world embrace these criteria.

The aim of alcohol marketing and advertising is presumably to increase consumption of the brands advertised. So a matter of much debate is whether such alcohol advertising and media exposure might influence the drinking behaviour of under-age youngsters.

This question is best addressed through large, prospective cohort studies that examine the links between early exposure to alcohol advertising (at baseline) and subsequent consumption and misuse. In recent years many such studies have been conducted, and plenty of the most rigorous ones, meeting high standards, are available for critical evaluation in systematic reviews.

Lesley Smith and David Foxcroft (2009) reviewed seven cohort studies that followed up more than 13,000 young people (aged 10-26 years). Peter Anderson et al (2009) reviewed 13 longitudinal studies involving over 38,000 adolescents. All these studies measured exposure to advertising and promotion in a variety of ways. Follow-up periods ranged from 8 months to 8 years. They all conclude that exposure to media and

commercial communications on alcohol increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to drink alcohol; and will drink more if they are already using alcohol at baseline.

For example, 11-year-olds with the highest levels of exposure to alcohol advertising and marketing were 50% more likely to be drinkers than their counterparts with low exposure (Collins et al, 2007). And amongst non-drinkers aged 11 to 15 years, those reporting high receptivity to alcohol marketing were 77% more likely to start drinking during the following year, compared with those reporting minimal receptivity (Henriksen et al, 2008).

Moreover, these results are supported by findings in cross-sectional surveys that also consistently report links between increased exposure to alcohol advertising and drinking behaviour, or advertising awareness and liking. And because they focus on mass media advertising, the impact of wider alcohol promotion and marketing may be under-estimated.

Given such firm links, we now need to know how such exposure leads to these changes, or which aspects of alcohol advertising/marketing are the effective components. And at what age do these links begin? Children are exposed to TV alcohol adverts from early in life, but do they like them? Such questions are clearly relevant to the issue of alcohol advertising and adolescent drinking.

Here in the UK, psychologists at the University of Hertford have been investigating children's responses to TV alcohol advertising (Nash et al, 2009). They showed that children as young as 7 years old like alcohol advertisements on TV – especially ones with humour, cartoon format, animals and special characters. Secondly, recent study in Australia (Winter et al, 2008) found that children and under-age teenagers are currently exposed to “unacceptably high levels of alcohol advertising on television” (presumably because they are watching TV after the 9pm watershed). However, it should be emphasised, as noted in the introduction, that cartoon format, animals and special characters that could be appealing to those under the legal drinking age, are not permitted by EU, US or Australasian regulatory bodies for example.

As Smith and Foxcroft conclude, “we now have stronger empirical evidence to inform the policy debate on the impact of alcohol advertising on young people.”

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