Alcohol Advertising: What are the issues?

Why does alcohol advertising matter?

Every day in Australia, young people are exposed to increasing levels of alcohol advertising and marketing. Alcohol advertising and promotion encourage positive associations with alcohol and links drinking alcohol with attractive symbols and role models.

For example, beer advertisements often suggest that the product can help the drinker to be more relaxed, happy and successful; and advertisements for “alcopops” (alcoholic lemonades) often link consumption of the product with social, sexual and business success.

While many academics and public health advocates believe that alcohol advertising targets underage drinkers, the industry argues that advertising is targeted at people over the age of 18.

Whether they are deliberately targeted or not, there is increasing evidence that young people see lots of alcohol advertisements, remember alcohol advertisements, and like alcohol advertisements.

There is also a clear association between seeing, and liking, alcohol advertisements and underage drinking. Recent evidence from the United States shows that exposure to alcohol advertising in the 7th grade predicts both any drinking in 9th grade; and that the more alcohol advertisements young people see, the more alcohol they drink.

We also know that exposure to alcohol advertising increases young people’s perceptions of drinking as a ‘normal’ behaviour. Both previous studies and current research conducted by the Centre for Health Initiatives with young Australians aged 15-24 has found that they believe that these advertisements tell them that drinking will help them have a great time, fit in, feel more confident, and be more attractive to the opposite sex.

How much alcohol advertising is there in Australia?

Alcohol companies spend more than $100 million per year on advertising in Australia, mainly on television, billboards and magazines.

A recent study in the Sydney and Melbourne metropolitan areas found that 13-17 year olds see almost as much alcohol advertising on television as 18-29 year olds.

Are there any rules about alcohol advertising in Australia?

Advertising in Australia (including alcohol advertising) is covered by industry self-regulation. This means that the industry develops, implements, and monitors the rules around the types of messages that can be included in alcohol advertisements.

The only aspect of a alcohol advertising that is currently regulated by the government is the times that alcohol advertising can appear on television. This rule – which is supposed to protect children from exposure to alcohol advertising – says that alcohol advertising can only be shown after 8.30 at night (except between 12:00noon to 3.00pm on school days); or during the live broadcast of a sporting event on weekends and public holidays.

What does the community think?

Surveys in Australia and the United States show that the majority of adults support further reductions, or even bans, on alcohol advertising.

A study conducted in 2005, with a sample of 1,000 Australian adults, found that only 28% were aware of there being any restrictions or regulations regarding the advertising of alcohol and only 2% aware of any restrictions in relation to Internet advertising of alcohol.

Several Australian studies have shown that this self-regulatory system doesn’t protect young people from exposure to inappropriate alcohol advertising.

Key Points

- Exposure to alcohol advertising is associated with early initiation of drinking and increased levels of drinking among young people
- Messages in alcohol advertising tell young people that drinking will make them more attractive, more popular, and have more fun
- In Australia, advertisers spend more than $1 million every year on alcohol advertising, about half of this is television advertising
- Most Australians don’t know what the rules are or how to complain about alcohol advertisements

What Can I Do?

- Educate schools and community groups about the effects of alcohol advertising on young people
- Lobby for stricter regulations on the advertising of alcohol
- Support initiatives that reduce young people’s exposure to alcohol advertising

Other Fact Sheets in this Series

- ADV1: Alcohol Advertising Summary
- ADV3: Alcohol Advertising: What are the rules?
- ADV4: Alcohol Advertising: What is the code?
- ADV5 (Part A & B): Alcohol Advertising: How do I complain?
- ADV6: Alcohol Advertising: The AANA Advertiser Code of Ethics
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- ADV8: Alcohol Advertising: Further Reading