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## Review shows alcohol companies reach youth online

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By Meredith Cohn, The Baltimore Sun  
4:37 p.m. EST, January 8, 2012

A beer bottle was lit up like a Christmas tree on one Facebook page and flanked by stuffed animals in another.

Then there were the iPhone apps that allowed drinking enthusiasts to hunt for virtual trophies or monitor the weather through drink prices, and the video on YouTube that featured cartoon characters using spirits to reduce stress.

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David Jernigan came across these alcohol advertisements during a recent study of social media. And he says that while they may be effective marketing for legal imbibers, they're also appealing to kids.

The alcohol companies' voluntary limits on print, radio and television that alcohol companies are largely being ignored online, concluded Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"We tried to get a sense of everything the companies are doing on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and iPhone apps and it's amazing how much they're doing," said Jernigan. "It's far more than I think most parents or adults are aware of. It's the wild west without a sheriff."

Associations representing alcohol companies say they've developed voluntary codes for advertising in social media, similar to those crafted for traditional media outlets.

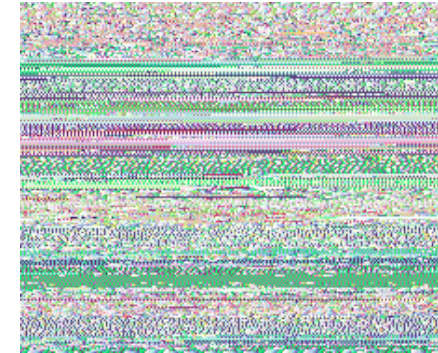
"The spirits industry is committed to responsible advertising regardless of the medium," the Distilled Spirits Council said in statement. "Social networking sites are used primarily by adults, which makes these platforms responsible and appropriate channels for spirits marketers."

Jernigan said there's no way to determine how many kids are seeing, or responding to, the alcohol marketing. But considering their heavy social media use, he concluded, "it's probably a lot."

He said 13- to 20-year-olds make up about 13.6 percent of the population but about 22 percent of Facebook users.

A May study from Consumer Reports found that amounts to about 20 million Facebook users under age 21. More than a third were actually younger than 13 — violating the site's terms — and their accounts were largely unsupervised by parents.

They could be among the 6.7 million people who "liked" the 10 Facebook pages the center studied or the large number of fan-uploaded photos and videos.



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And even if they do visit a site with adult content, technology can screen them. Sites like Facebook use information gathered on users to appropriately target ads. Companies also can use age gates and skim comments and other content to find and block underage users.

"There are a bunch of things companies can do to say to kids this isn't for you, and if you don't go away, there are people dedicated to stopping you," he said.

Monitoring the companies' efforts is the Federal Trade Commission. **Janet Evans**, a senior attorney in the Division of Advertising Practices, said social media's use is still new and no one is truly sure how much marketing is reaching kids.

According to a 2008 agency study, just over 1 percent of alcohol industry advertising dollars, or about \$35.5 million of the \$3 billion spent, went to sponsored Internet sites. Much more went to television, promotions and sponsorships. Evan said dollars go much further online, so companies are likely to ramp up spending in coming years.

The agency is collecting comments for another study on the market size and reach. Officials plan to issue recommendations aimed at protecting youth as well as privacy, likely in 2013.

"We'll figure out if there should be a better self-regulatory approach, which is the primary way we address marketing to minors," she said. "We really use the bully pulpit on industry."

The agency faces First Amendment issues in trying to regulate speech online, she said. But in some cases, Evans said the FTC can use a law aimed at preventing unfair or deceptive ads.

It used the law, for example, to stop alcohol companies from marketing caffeinated drinks and claiming they kept consumers alert. Evans said a case could be made that marketing to kids is unfair, though the agency is likely to continue pursuing voluntary steps.

She says there has been progress in print and online. Before 2003, the alcohol companies were advertising in media where only half of the audience was assumed to be aged 21. By 2008, the companies had agreed to raise the bar to 71.6 percent because the FTC showed that was the percent of the population over the legal drinking age. (The FTC had asked for a 75 percent adult audience threshold.)

The FTC also told the companies that it was their responsibility to police their own sites.

"It's not perfect but it's better," she said of the effort. "It doesn't mean youth are not seeing ads, but it reduces the likelihood that the companies are deliberately targeting a youth audience."

Jernigan said seeing such content can make a lasting impression. He cited 14 studies finding evidence that exposure to ads influences whether young people start drinking and how much. He said about 4,700 underage youth die from excessive alcohol use each year.

Tighter controls on content, more parental involvement and better technology to limit underage access are needed, he said.

The Distilled Spirits Council said it calls on companies to advertise in any medium only when close to three-quarters of the audience is reasonably expected to be age 21. The group cited Nielsen data from August that show about 82 percent of Facebook users, 87 percent of Twitter users and 81 percent of YouTube users are at least 21.

Codes also call for inappropriate user-generated content to be removed and age-affirming technology be used before direct dialogue is allowed with consumers. And as evidence the companies are not increasing their influence on kids, the council cited newly released federal statistics that show alcohol consumption rates among eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders are declining.

The National Institute on **Drug Abuse**, part of the **National Institutes of Health**, found alcohol use dropped to its lowest point since monitoring began in 1975. Though, alcohol is still "the drug of choice" among all the age groups, and almost 64 percent of 12th-graders reported drinking alcohol in the past year.

A digital marketing consultant to the Distilled Spirits Council said he didn't believe the sites were deluged with children. Kids on Facebook with or without their parents' consent were most likely looking to engage with other kids, said Hemanshu Nigam, chief executive of SSP Blue, an online safety and privacy firm, and the former chief security officer for **MySpace**.

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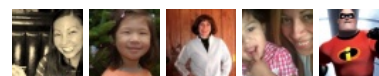
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The Center on Digital Democracy, which monitors online marketing and privacy issues, said the FTC could be doing more. Among other things, the group says the agency should investigate alcohol companies' use of techniques that influence subconscious responses. It should also investigate the adequacy of age verification mechanisms and insist a higher percentage of an online advertiser's audience be an adult.

Jeff Chester, the group's executive director, said social media is capable of more heavily influencing behavior than traditional media because it gives advertisers the ability to engage with whole communities. It also can reach consumers while they are in stores, clubs or with their friends and get them to market to their peers. It's also capable of changing based on how users interact with it, he said.

Chester said alcohol marketers are in the forefront of the move into social media, and there's a window to stop an impending public health crisis among kids.

"I'm not saying stop marketing online but there has to be agreement among industry and advocates about what is appealing to youth," he said. "This the way business is done in the 21st century, but there needs to be safeguards, and what those safeguards should be is at the heart of the battle."

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