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Pilot Study Finds Youth More Likely Than Adults To Report Seeing Alcohol Marketing on the Internet

Young people also report more interactions with online alcohol content, such as liking or sharing posts

Underage youth are nearly twice as likely to recall seeing alcohol marketing on the internet than adults, with almost one in three saying they saw alcohol-related content in the previous month, according to a new pilot survey led by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The young people, those between the ages of 13 and 20 who responded to an online survey, were also more likely than adults surveyed to report seeing or hearing alcohol marketing within the previous month in traditional outlets, including television (69 percent versus 62 percent), radio (25 percent versus 17 percent), and billboards (55 percent versus 35 percent). The greatest difference between adults and youth occurred when asked about exposure to alcohol advertising on the internet (30 percent versus 17 percent).

The findings underscore previous research suggesting that youth may be impressionable to many of the messages conveyed by alcohol marketing, for instance, that drinking can lead to happiness and social acceptance.

The research was led by the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY), part of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and is published online in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. The study was the first to pilot questions about youth and adult recall of alcohol marketing online.

“Alcohol marketing exposure among youth is associated with more underage drinking – binge drinking specifically – so it is concerning to see more youth than adults reporting exposure,” says study leader David Jernigan, PhD, the director of CAMY and an associate professor in the Department of Health, Behavior and Society at the Bloomberg School. “It is also concerning that more youth report engaging with online alcohol content than adults.”

The survey examined participants’ social media engagement with other types of alcohol-related content besides advertising. It found that youth liked, shared or posted alcohol-related content online in greater proportions than adults, including celebrities using alcohol (11 percent versus 6 percent) and pictures of their friends or peers using alcohol (14 percent versus 10 percent).

For their survey, the researchers used a national sample of 1,192 youth ages 13 to 20, and 1,124 adults age 21 and older, drawing on a database maintained by GfK Custom Research. The survey

was administered from September to October, 2013, and examined exposure to alcohol advertising and promotional content in traditional and digital media in the past 30 days as well as other types of online alcohol-related content.

Survey respondents were asked about specific kinds of alcohol marketing as well as other types of alcohol content they saw online. More than one-third of youth respondents recalled seeing pictures online of celebrities using alcohol in the past 30 days, compared to 21 percent of adults. Meanwhile, 28 percent of youth recalled seeing pictures of celebrities wearing clothes or other items with an alcohol brand's logo or name on it as opposed to 16 percent of adults.

“The survey findings do not necessarily mean that youth are in fact seeing more alcohol advertising than adults. It could be that youth are more likely to recall such advertising when asked about it,” Jernigan says.

Alcohol is the number one drug of choice among young people in the United States, and excessive alcohol use is responsible for an average of 4,350 deaths every year among people under the legal drinking age of 21. At least 24 studies have found that young people under the legal drinking age who are more exposed to alcohol marketing are more likely to start drinking early and also to engage in binge drinking.

In the United States, alcohol advertising and marketing are primarily self-regulated by the alcohol industry, whereby the industry sets its own voluntary guidelines with respect to limiting exposure to young people.

“Self-Reported Youth and Adult Exposure to Alcohol Marketing in Traditional and Digital Media: Results of a Pilot Survey” was written by David Jernigan (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health), Alisa Padon (University of Pennsylvania), Craig Ross (Boston University School of Public Health) and Dina Borzekowski (University of Maryland, College Park).

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