

# Alcohol advertising reaching too many teens on cable TV, researchers say

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A new study from the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, in collaboration with UCLA, has found a striking correlation between teenage viewership and the frequency of alcohol advertising on cable television. The findings show that ads for beer, spirits and "alcopop" aired much more frequently when more teens were watching.

While previous studies have shown that the average adolescent is exposed to well over 200 alcohol ads on television each year, this is the first to demonstrate an association between ad placement and teen cable TV viewership. Cable TV attracts about 95 percent of all nationally televised alcohol ads.

The study will be published in the October issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* and is currently available online by subscription.

"Alcohol advertisers have pledged to avoid audiences made up of more than 30 percent underage viewers — such as children's programming," said David H. Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth and an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "However, many other shows have adolescent appeal. This research suggests that ads are aimed at groups that include a disproportionate number of teens and that the alcohol industry's voluntary self-monitoring is not working to reduce adolescent exposure to ads."

Using advertising industry data from Nielsen Media Research,

researchers examined all 600,000 national cable alcohol ads shown from 2001 through 2006 to audiences with less than 30 percent of viewers between the ages of 12 and 20. Among the findings:

- Audiences with a higher percentage of youth between the ages of 12 and 20 were exposed to a higher frequency of alcohol ads, even after accounting for other factors that might explain ad placement decisions.
- Each 1-percentage-point increase in adolescent viewership was associated with a 7-percent increase in beer ads, a 15-percent increase in spirits ads and a 22-percent increase in ads for low-alcohol refreshers/alcopops — flavored alcoholic beverages that taste similar to juice or soda.
- In contrast, wine ads decreased by 8 percent with each 1-percentage-point increase in adolescent viewership; this finding suggests that alcohol advertisers can, in fact, successfully avoid adolescent audiences.

"This study did not examine whether alcohol advertisers are intentionally overexposing adolescents," said lead study author Dr. Paul J. Chung, assistant professor of pediatrics at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA and a senior natural scientist at the RAND Corp. "The alcohol industry has consistently denied actively targeting teens, and our study isn't designed to test that claim. However, the ultimate effect of their advertising strategies, intentional or not, appears to be greater exposure than might be expected if adults were the sole targets of ads."

For years, alcohol has been the substance of abuse most commonly used by teens in the United States, and the public health consequences of underage drinking are considerable. Numerous studies and national

statistics report that adolescents are involved in a significant proportion of the injuries, violence and crime that stem from binge drinking and other forms of alcohol abuse. Moreover, studies have shown that starting to drink as an adolescent has been linked with much greater risks of lifelong problem drinking.

Multiple studies suggest that alcohol ads can have substantial influence on underage drinking attitudes and behaviors.

"It's difficult to document experimentally," said Chung, who also directs the UCLA-RAND Center for Adolescent Health Promotion. "But there's not too much doubt that advertising and marketing affect the behavior of both children and adults. Common sense tells us that if it didn't work, companies probably wouldn't be spending so much money on it. So, it's a lot harder for parents, teachers and clinicians to successfully encourage kids to delay drinking when so many things they're seeing — on television, on billboards, on movie screens, on the Internet — are telling them otherwise."

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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