

ALCOHOL MARKETING AND YOUNG PEOPLE: Time for a new policy agenda

Young people are starting to drink at an earlier age, and most drink in ways that put their health at risk. Addressing the marketing and promotion of alcohol to young people is a critical element in an overall strategy to address this issue. A growing evidence base that links alcohol marketing to harmful drinking patterns amongst young people, combined with renewed public scrutiny of the inappropriate promotion of alcohol, has created added impetus to tighten restrictions around alcohol marketing. This paper examines the evidence base that links alcohol marketing to harmful drinking patterns amongst young people, considers the problems with current regulations around alcohol advertising, and outlines the AMA's position in relation to alcohol advertising and promotion.

All children and adolescents have the right to grow up in an environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and, to the extent possible, from the promotion of alcoholic beverages.

– World Health Organisation, European Charter on Alcohol (1995)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people are starting to drink at an earlier age, and most drink in ways that put their health at risk. Addressing the marketing and promotion of alcohol to young people is critical in an overall strategy to address this issue.

In the contemporary media and communications landscape, young people are exposed to alcohol marketing at an unprecedented level and from multiple sources. Alongside more traditional modes of advertising through television and radio, the introduction of digital technologies has opened up new platforms for marketing and promotion, with alcohol companies aggressively harnessing the marketing potential of online video channels, mobile phones, interactive games, and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Marketing efforts are increasingly sophisticated and multidimensional, integrating online and offline promotions with the sponsorship of music and sporting events, the distribution of branded merchandise, and the proliferation of new alcoholic brands and flavours.

The alcohol industry denies their marketing campaigns specifically target children or teens. However, research consistently demonstrates that young people in Australia are regularly exposed to alcohol marketing across a variety of settings and media platforms. In addition to the ubiquity of alcohol references in the social networking sites and online media frequented by young people, studies have shown that young people continue to be exposed to alcohol marketing through television advertising, print media with a high youth readership, and product placement in film, music videos, comics and video games. Alongside these various forms of marketing, there is accumulating evidence that young people in Australia are encountering alcohol messages, associations and products in a multitude of everyday settings and interactions, including alcohol-sponsored music and sporting events, free gift promotions, alcohol-branded merchandise and interactive competitions.

The explosive rise in alcohol marketing has powerful effects on young people. An extensive body of research indicates that alcohol marketing shapes young people's attitudes and behaviours, encouraging them to take up drinking, and to drink more once they do. The findings of research undertaken in both Australia and abroad show that attitudes and assumptions about drinking are not only shaped by the content of advertising, but also by the sheer volume and variety of marketing. Based on the weight of this evidence, several recent international, systematic reviews conclude that alcohol marketing increases the likelihood that adolescents will start to use alcohol, and will drink more if they are already using alcohol.

With convincing evidence supporting the link between alcohol marketing and alcohol consumption by young people, there is an urgent need to tackle the problem of alcohol marketing in Australia with robust policy and stronger regulatory oversight. While children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to alcohol marketing, young people aged up to their mid-20s are highly susceptible and, as a prime target group for alcohol marketers, are at particular risk of alcohol-related harms. Stronger policy and regulation of alcohol marketing should encompass all these groups of young people.

Existing policy and regulatory responses in Australia have proven inadequate and have failed to keep up with the pace and scope of change in the media and marketing environment. The self-regulatory scheme for alcohol advertising in Australia is funded and administered by the alcohol industry. It is voluntary, limited in scope, unable to enforce penalties, and ultimately fails to protect young people from continuous exposure to alcohol marketing.

As the media marketplace continues its rapid transformation, the growing volume and complexity of alcohol marketing to young people deserves close scrutiny and demands prompt, remedial action by policymakers.

The AMA believes that the exposure of children and young people to alcohol marketing must be curtailed, and recommends the following measures:

1. The regulation of alcohol marketing and promotion, including as it relates to children and young people, should be statutory and independent of the alcohol and advertising industries. Experience in Australia and overseas demonstrates that self-regulation is not the answer.
2. Meaningful sanctions for serious or persistent non-compliance with marketing regulations should be introduced, particularly where those regulations relate to children and young people.
3. The sponsorship of sport by alcohol companies and brands should be phased out, with organisations encouraged and assisted to source socially responsible alternative funding.
4. Sponsorship by alcohol companies and brands should be prohibited at youth, cultural and musical events.
5. Given the cumulative effects of marketing, regulations need to limit the volume or amount of alcohol marketing, as well as its content.
6. The regulation of alcohol marketing should be expanded to incorporate point-of-sale promotions, branded merchandise, and new media and digital marketing, including marketing through social media, viral campaigns, mobile phones, and the use of data collection and behavioural profiling. Regulations should be sufficiently flexible to incorporate new and evolving digital marketing activities.
7. The amount spent annually on marketing by leading alcohol companies should be publicly disclosed, including expenditure on social media, online video, mobile campaigns, events sponsorship and product placement.
8. Continuing research into the extent and impact of online and digital marketing, and the effectiveness of different regulatory approaches to this form of marketing.
9. Options to develop a cross-border, international response to alcohol marketing should be pursued. The Framework Convention of Tobacco Control provides a possible model for global governance to control alcohol marketing. Examples of possible standard-setting mechanisms include World Health Organisation regulations, ISO standards and Codex Alimentarius Standards.
10. Health education addressing alcohol consumption should build the critical media literacy of young people.

Preventing alcohol marketing to young people needs to be incorporated as part of a comprehensive and multi-faceted strategy addressing alcohol-related harms in Australia.

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