

Analysis of alcohol ads in magazines finds current codes, regulations do not protect consumers from risky content

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A new report from the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health calls into question whether existing federal and voluntary standards for alcohol advertisements curtail potentially damaging content and protect public health.

The researchers examined nearly 1,800 different ads for beer, spirits and alcopops that appeared between 2008 and 2010 in national magazines; they found that while the ads largely adhered to existing regulations and codes, numerous adherent ads still contained content promoting unhealthy and problematic consumption. Examples include ads showing scantily clad, objectified and sexualized women, and ads associating alcoholic beverages with active lifestyles and weight control. The report is published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

"Considering advertising's demonstrated power to shape behavior, it's important that the [public health](#) community be knowledgeable about [alcohol](#) advertising content, particularly when it reaches underage audiences," said study author Katherine C. Smith, associate professor with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "Our findings suggest further limitations and enhanced federal oversight may be necessary to protect public health."

Alcohol is heavily marketed in the United States: Alcohol companies

spend at least \$4 billion a year on promotion; an estimated \$847 million was spent on magazine advertising alone from 2008 to 2010. At least 14 studies have found that the more young people are exposed to alcohol advertising and marketing, the more likely they are to drink, or if they are already drinking, to drink more.

Federal regulation of alcohol advertising and marketing is minimal. Marketers may not make false claims that are intended to deceive, and they cannot include statements judged indecent or which make health or curative claims. In addition to federal limits, marketing is also governed by a system of self-regulation under the Beer Institute and the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, both of whose codes emphasize responsible practices on the part of alcohol producers.

"The devil is in the details when it comes to regulation, and there are currently very few details as to what constitutes unacceptable practices regarding alcohol advertising," said study author and CAMY director David Jernigan, also an associate professor with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "When we see time and time again examples of problematic ads that comply with existing regulations and industry standards, we must ask ourselves what more can be done to protect the public's health."

The study authors likened alcohol industry self-regulation to what happened when regulation of tobacco advertising was left up to that industry.

"As seen with tobacco, self-regulation permits an industry to frame approaches as credible when they may actually work against the overall health and well-being of the public," Smith said.

In 2003, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine recommended that alcohol companies take "reasonable precautions" to

reduce youth exposure to alcohol advertising.

"Given the clear difficulties with regulating content, tightening guidelines about when and where companies may place their ads would also help protect youth from problematic alcohol advertising," Jernigan said.

Alcohol is the most commonly used and abused drug among youth in the United States, and is responsible for more than 4,700 annual deaths among underage youth.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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