

Underage youth exposed to alcohol advertising through social media

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Evan Williams. Credit: Thomas Hawk via Flickr

Researchers from RAND Europe and the University of Cambridge investigated the marketing campaigns of five alcohol companies – Fosters, Magners, Carling, Stella Artois and Tia Maria – to assess their use of social media websites for advertising. The researchers tried to determine whether children and young adults could be exposed to these campaigns.

All five brands maintained Facebook, YouTube and Twitter accounts, connecting them to consumers. While all five of the brands did have age restrictions in place on Facebook, prohibiting individuals under the age

of 18 from accessing the companies' pages, no such age limitations exist on YouTube.

Only two of the brands – Carling and Stella Artois – had age-related restrictions in place for their Twitter pages. Warning messages about age requirements were used by several of the brands on YouTube and Twitter accounts; however, these messages did not prevent access to the pages.

Researchers point out that users could lie about their age when setting up an account on Facebook and YouTube, although the real-world peer relationships facilitated through the sites encourage use of genuine data; but, while Facebook uses age-related information to block access, YouTube doesn't.

"The main difference between Facebook and YouTube was that even if you were logged in as an underage person on YouTube, you could still access the [alcohol](#) pages, whereas you couldn't on Facebook," said Eleanor Winpenny, a co-author of the study from RAND Europe, who also pointed out that you don't need to be logged in to YouTube to be exposed to the majority of such advertising.

In the study, recently published in the journal *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, the researchers conclude that the rise in [online marketing](#) of alcohol coupled with the high use of social media by young people suggest that this is an area requiring further regulation.

"Whether deliberate or not, our results show that children are not protected from online marketing of alcohol," said Professor Theresa Marteau, Director of Cambridge's Behaviour and Health Research Unit, a study co-author.

"Existing evidence, based on more traditional marketing, would suggest

that online marketing of alcohol will be contributing to under-age drinking."

Ninety percent of 15- to 24-year-olds and 43.5% of 6- to 14-year-olds who use the internet are currently using these social networking sites. While the researchers could not determine what proportion of viewership and followers of these brands' accounts were underage, the high use of these sites by children and teenagers suggests that a significant proportion could be from this population.

According to the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing (CAP Code), any media which has 25% or more of its users below 18 years of age, should not be used to promote alcohol. With such a high percentage of children accessing these [social media](#) sites, the results from this study suggest that either the CAP Code is not being followed, or these guidelines are not strict enough.

Alcohol advertisements on the social networking sites included promotional videos, recipes, games and competitions. The study showed that fans of the products engaged with the sites via 'Likes', this in turn linked the users' profiles with the brands'. Fans were also able to subscribe or follow the accounts, and actively engage with the brands' pages via comments and mentions.

Professor Marteau said that it is the interactive nature of these adverts which may make them more effective than standard advertising: "interacting with material increases its impact over passive processing of more traditional marketing."

More information: Eleanor M. Winpenny, Theresa M. Marteau, and Ellen Nolte. "Exposure of Children and Adolescents to Alcohol Marketing on Social Media Websites." *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, first

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