New study shows advertizing for alcohol is prevalent in UK television

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A new study in the *Journal of Public Health* indicates that advertising for alcohol is common in British television, and may be a potential driver of alcohol use in young people.

It is estimated that the rate of alcohol consumption in those over 15 in

the UK is the eighth highest in Europe. Alcohol use was responsible for at least 6813 deaths in the country in 2015, and cost the NHS £3.5 billion in 2013-14.

There is strong evidence that exposure to advertising or other alcohol imagery in the media increases subsequent use in adolescents. An estimated 28 million British households have at least one television and in 2015 the average viewing was 3 hours and 47 minutes a day. Previous studies have found that alcohol imagery appeared frequently in studies of UK television; some 40 per cent of programs contained alcohol content.

In 2015, researchers quantified the content of all programs and advertisements broadcast on the five, free access, national UK channels. The researchers here explored the differences in content between channels and genres, and compared these with the findings of a similar study in 2010.

A total of 611 programs and 1140 commercials were recorded during the peak viewing hours, between 6 and 10 pm, from Monday to Sunday in three separate weeks. Alcohol imagery occurred most frequently in the news, current affairs programs, and soap operas.

This study demonstrates that alcohol imagery is extremely common on UK television, occurring in over 50% of all programs broadcast and almost 50% of all advertising periods between programs. The majority of alcohol content occurred before 9 pm. Branding occurred in 18% of programs and 11% of advertisement periods and involved 122 brands, though three brands (Heineken, Corona, and Fosters) accounted for almost half of all brand appearances.

Alcohol content shown on TV has an effect on the uptake of alcohol use in young people. This analysis shows that television remains a major

source of alcohol exposure to young people in the UK and is likely to continue to be a contributor to alcohol uptake by young people, with levels of content slightly higher than the researchers observed in the earlier analysis of program content from 2010.

"There is strong evidence that viewing alcohol advertising or imagery has an uptake on subsequent alcohol use in young people," said Alexander Barker, research fellow at the Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies. "Our study shows that alcohol imagery, including branding, is regularly broadcast on prime-time TV, when children and adolescents are likely to be watching. Tighter scheduling rules from the Advertising Standards Agency and Ofcom (broadcast regulator), such as restricting alcohol advertisements and alcohol imagery in programs, to after the 9 p.m. watershed, could prevent children and adolescents being exposed to this content."

More information: Alexander B Barker et al, A content analysis of alcohol content in UK television, *Journal of Public Health* (2018). DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdy142

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