

# Exposure to TV alcohol ads linked to drinking behavior

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The Most Interesting Man in the World preferred Dos Equis, James Bond promoted Heineken and a rescue dog fetched Bud Light for partygoers.

Aired in 2012, those were just a few of the nearly 600 televised commercials for [alcohol products](#)—mostly beer—that the average American adult was exposed to that year, according to new Cornell research.

The study provides some of the most precise estimates yet of Americans' exposure to such ads—averaging more than one a day—and found a link between that exposure and drinking behavior.

The more alcohol ads someone was exposed to, the study determined, the more likely they were to report consuming at least one [alcoholic drink](#) in the previous month. And among drinkers, exposure to more ads correlated to consuming more drinks.

"These ads are so ubiquitous, especially for certain types of audiences, that this cumulative, repeated exposure seems to have the potential to reinforce the behavior," said Jeff Niederdeppe, associate professor of communication in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "Higher exposure to the ads is clearly and consistently linked to higher levels of drinking."

Niederdeppe is the co-author of the study published May 18 in the journal *Addiction* with Rosemary Avery, professor of policy analysis and management in the College of Human Ecology, and Christofer Skurka Ph.D. '19, assistant professor at Penn State University. Three undergraduates from the Department of Policy Analysis and Management also contributed to the paper: Emmett Tabor '19, Nathaniel Lee '19 and Brendan Welch '21.

The research team mined commercial data that tracked what time and on what networks advertisements for beer, wine and spirits ran in more than 200 individual media markets from 2010-13.

That data was paired with the TV viewing and drinking habits reported by nearly 55,000 adults in the Simmons National Consumer Survey, which also provided a wealth of demographic data.

The analysis made it possible to know, for example, that a survey respondent from Phoenix who watched "The Office" on NBC might have seen a Budweiser ad that aired during the program in that market.

Previous studies have relied on more "blunt" measures, Niederdeppe said, that did not account for variation in viewing preferences within local markets: Everyone in Phoenix was counted the same way.

"We were able to come up with a much more precise estimate of the likelihood of a particular individual being exposed to an ad," Niederdeppe said.

On average, the researchers estimated, survey respondents were exposed to 576 alcohol ads over the previous year—nearly 70% of those for beer, followed by spirits and then wine.

True to stereotype, men were estimated to have been exposed to nearly twice as many beer commercials as women. Wine ad exposure was estimated to be higher among women, but the numbers of wine ads were small relative to beer ads.

African Americans were disproportionately exposed to televised alcohol advertising, the study found, seeing about 150 more commercials a year than white survey respondents, likely due to industry targeting, Niederdeppe said.

The research team estimated that a doubling of exposure to [alcohol ads](#) would increase by 11% the odds that someone reported having at least one drink in the last 30 days, and among drinkers would increase by 5%

the number of drinks consumed during the previous month.

"These patterns were consistent across demographic groups and they were consistent across alcohol types," Niederdeppe said.

The magnitude of increased drinking associated with people who saw more ads is not huge, Niederdeppe said, but it adds up.

"Maybe it's a handful of drinks, but it's a handful of drinks spread across a very large number of people," he said. "To the extent that increases in alcohol consumption, particularly at high levels, are associated with negative health outcomes, then there's the potential for a significant effect at the population level."

The study contributes to the body of evidence policymakers should consider while scientists debate whether even moderate [alcohol](#) consumption is safe, Niederdeppe said.

"It makes clear," he said, "that there's a huge volume of exposure that is potentially consequential."

**More information:** Jeff Niederdeppe et al. Estimated televised alcohol advertising exposure in the past year and associations with past 30-day drinking behavior among American adults: results from a secondary analysis of large-scale advertising and survey data, *Addiction* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/add.15088](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.15088)

Provided by Cornell University

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