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# Are America's biggest alcohol brands targeting the country's underage youth?

By **Roberto A. Ferdman** July 9 at 10:13 AM 

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Lend us your ears, and we'll sell you ours beers. (Ken James/Bloomberg News)

It might be time for a bit of alcohol industry intervention.

Underage drinkers — those between the ages of 18 and 20, most specifically — are more heavily exposed to printed alcohol advertisements than any other age group, [according to a new study](#). And it's America's biggest booze companies that could be to blame. The makers of Bud Light, Smirnoff Vodka, Coors Light, Absolut Vodka and a number of other popular drinks were among those whose advertisements were most heavily exposed to the underage drinkers.

The study, undertaken at Johns Hopkins University

Bloomberg School of Public Health, scanned national magazine readership data to determine which age groups were being exposed to which alcohol brands. The authors believe it's the first of its kind — no study has previously examined the exposure of youth to magazine advertisements for popular alcohol brands. They also believe its results should be alarming. While the study stopped short of establishing any intent by major alcohol companies, it affirms a strong association between the beers and spirits underage drinkers like best and the ones they see most often in their favorite magazines, such as Sports Illustrated, ESPN the Magazine, US Weekly and Vogue.

Males between the age of 18 and 20 were about nine times more likely to find ads by the top 25 brands than the remaining 300-plus alcohol labels, according to the study. Females in the same age group were five times more likely.

"It is striking that the popular brands are so much more likely to have most heavily exposed 18-20 years than the less popular brands among young people," David Jernigan, one of the study's authors, said in an interview.

"Spending all this money to advertise your product to a group that can't yet purchase your product seems odd."

That is, unless those brands are subtly working to ensure their alcoholic hegemony.

"Indoctrination? To use a word like that I would have to be able to prove intent, which I can't right now," Jernigan said. "But the association is definitely supportive of our hypothesis that the advertising is playing a role."

Alcohol advertising is largely self-regulated in the U.S., meaning that the alcohol industry sets its own voluntary barriers. Those include minimizing their exposure to underage drinkers. Alcohol advertisements, for instance, should be used only in magazines where less than 30 percent of the readers are underage. But given the outcome of this study, and the overwhelming popularity of the top alcohol brands among America's underage drinkers — the top 25 brands [account for nearly 50 percent](#) of all underage binge drinking episodes — it appears that self-regulation likely won't suffice.

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