

Alcohol marketing is finding its way to children in the age of the internet and smartphones, study says

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When it comes to keeping kids away from alcohol advertisements, education programs and parents have frequently thought of television as the primary source. However, YouTube videos have become a significant contributor of alcohol marketing and in an era of social media and smartphones, parents are often behind the curve with their children.

That's among the findings of a study led by a University of Pittsburgh professor that was published this week in the September issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

In the study, researchers analyzed 137 YouTube videos that advertised or promoted popular alcohol brands such as Bud Light beer, Grey Goose vodka and Mike's Hard Lemonade. The combined total views of the videos analyzed was more than 96 million views, although the ages of the viewers were unknown.

"Brand recognition is an extremely powerful tool that alcohol marketers use," said Brian Primack, director of the University of Pittsburgh Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health. He added that research as indicated that the more ads for a brand of alcohol an underage drinker sees, the more likely he or she is to consume that product.

The videos were categorized in a variety of ways. Video type included advertisements, music videos, user-created reviews and chugging. The videos were also characterized in its production quality from poor to professional and negative or positive associations such as vehicle use and

humor were identified. Each video was watched by two people who categorized them. The whole process took a month of full-time work, Dr. Primack said.

The results and trends of the videos differed between alcohol brands and video types. Forty percent of the videos were traditional advertisements and 95 percent of the videos contained a male figure. Forty-seven percent contained humor and only a small percentage of the videos portrayed negative qualities such as aggression, addiction and injuries.

Dr. Primack said he was surprised to find that many of the television ads, which would often have thousands to millions of views, were uploaded to YouTube by ordinary people who were entertained rather than the alcohol companies themselves. “Even if the industry isn’t necessarily directly involved,” he said. “It still remains something that tends to function as advertising whether or not that was purposeful.”

When it came to individual brands and marketing strategies, Bud Light and Coors Light were far more likely to have humorous videos than Grey Goose and Jack Daniels. Sixty-three percent of narrative or documentary-style videos had physically attractive actors while 78 percent of the traditional advertisements used humor. No brand was found to have a significant association with attractive actors.

While there has been educational programs for kids about alcohol in movies or on television, social media and YouTube have been largely ignored, Dr. Primack said. “This demonstrates there is a large exposure [to children] that has been relatively under the radar,” he said.

David Jernigan, director at the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at John Hopkins University, said the digital marketing community is, on principle, not supposed to show alcohol advertisements unless over 71.6 percent of the audience is above 21. The figure comes from the percentage of population at drinking age from the 2010 census.

Users whose digital ages are under 21 also are not permitted to follow or subscribe to Twitter accounts or YouTube channels for alcohol brands, though Mr. Jernigan pointed out there are few people who find YouTube videos through channels instead of the search function and the companies never verify the ages of the users.

“The larger point here is, the industry has somewhat detailed codes if there is data available, but there is such few demographic data available,” he said. Unlike in television where the viewers’ demographic information can be purchased through Nielsen Holdings, Mr. Jernigan said demographic data is simply not available when it comes to YouTube and Google.

Tech companies have increasingly found themselves under heat for passively facilitating the spread of controversial or inappropriate content. Much like Facebook live videos streaming illegal and violent acts or CloudFlare, a prolific internet security company, and its recent termination of the Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi website which helped organize the protest in Charlottesville, Google has unwittingly found itself in the power of determining the standards of acceptable content. Mr. Jernigan said that videos depicting children taking high levels of risk with alcohol could be similarly damaging. “This is the Wild Wild West,” he said.

Along with advertisements, a YouTube search for “Jack Daniel’s” or “Bud Light” will show chugging or alcohol challenge videos among its top results. Matt Zion and Christopher Schewe are the primary creators of two YouTube channels that focus on food challenges that include drinking or chugging. Mr. Zion’s channel, “Wreckless Eating,” has more than 600,000 subscribers and its most popular videos include everything from eating the full Taco Bell menu to a 41-year-old fruitcake. Mr. Schewe’s channel has more than 500,000 subscribers and his most popular videos usually feature some sort of “slam” or chugging of hard alcohol. Although his YouTube video of him chugging half a gallon of Jack Daniels has more than 300,000 views, Mr. Schewe said his videos are often further shared over Facebook or Instagram.

“My argument has always been if you really care about what your child is looking at, you should be monitoring it to begin with,” Mr. Zion said. He said that similarly, he would never just let his child have full access to a television remote.

Mr. Jernigan said that parents are routinely blamed for not closely monitoring their kids but they’re limited given the free access many children have with their smartphones in their rooms.

“Kids are living in a world that parents aren’t. They are adopting [technology] way much earlier than we are,” he said. “It’s a lot to keep up with.” Public health research indicates that adult role-modeling, from parents to celebrities, has an impact on a child’s behavior, he added.

On the production side, Mr. Zion said he tries to make his alcohol videos “as safe as humanly possible” and he goes to the doctor every six months just to get checked out. He added that he never tries to promote that sort of behavior on his channel and his videos include specific warnings not to do what he is doing. Mr. Zion added that there have been other channels that take alcohol challenges to an extreme and have had to retire as a result.

Mr. Schewe, who is known online as “ShoeNice,” said that he thinks he is considered as a stuntman or a “professional idiot” in that viewers enjoy to watch his videos but would never try anything at that degree themselves.

“In my six years of slamming [chugging], I’ve never actually seen another kid actually slam a bottle or imitate it,” he said, adding that any videos he does receive are usually faking it. Similar to Mr. Zion, he said he also never tries to encourage this sort of behavior.

Mr. Zion said his viewers are primarily males in high school or college while Mr. Schewe said he has viewers from 15 to 55 years old. However, in order to view Mr. Schewe’s alcohol videos, users must have a YouTube account with an age of at least 18. Although it is difficult to attract advertisers due to the channel’s content, both Mr. Zion and Mr. Schewe rely on revenue from their digital presence as their primary source of income.

Mr. Jernigan said there have been 25 longitudinal studies that track children, their exposure to alcohol marketing and their alcohol consumption. All of them indicate that an individual’s exposure to alcohol is strongly correlated to starting to drink earlier and high-risk drinking habits. All of which can lead to motor-vehicle accidents, physical fights and addiction, he said.

“This is the leading drug among kids. It’s way ahead of everything else including marijuana,” Mr. Jernigan said.

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