

## How are underage drinkers influenced by alcohol ads?

By  
Livia Areas-Holmblad

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Alcohol is the most used substance by adolescents in the U.S. People who are between 12 and 20 years old drink 11 percent of all alcoholic beverages consumed in the country, and a new study found that these underage drinkers are heavily influenced by marketing and advertising.

Dr. Michael Siegel, a professor at the Boston University School of Public Health, decided to conduct the study because marketing has been known to potentially contribute to the underage drinking trend, but no other studies have examined the relationship between brand-specific advertising and consumption of alcohol.

“All of the previous research has looked at aggregate advertising and drinking behavior among young people,” he said. “The problem is that when you lump all advertising together, you’re basically lumping all brands together, but we

suspect that youth only drank a small number of brands. We know that young people are very brand conscious when it comes to other types of products, and we suspected that the same thing may be true with alcohol.”

For the study, published in [the American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse](#) and supported by a grant from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the researchers examined the exposure that people aged 12 to 20 had to brand-specific alcohol ads in magazines and television shows, in addition to looking at the 30-day consumption prevalence for separate brands among a sample of 1,031 drinkers aged 13 to 20 years old.

“We decided that it would be important to look at the specific relationship between not all advertising and youth drinking but specifically at advertising for certain brands,” Siegel said.

They also accessed information from 179 online alcohol retailers and estimated overall market shares for each of the 898 brands included in their data set. Social media was extensively used as an additional tool to assess the presence of each brand.

Siegel’s team found that underage drinkers were 36 percent more likely to consume alcoholic products that are advertised in national magazines, and more than five times more inclined to consume brands that advertise on national television — any televised commercial was linked to more than a five-fold increase in underage consumption.

“We did a survey of youth throughout the country. We found that they have very specific brand preferences, and they don’t drink certain brands,” he said. “There’s a larger number of brands that they just don’t touch, and there’s a small number of brands that are the most popular.”

The brands of alcohol that underage drinkers refuse to touch are the same brands that do not advertise very much on channels that have the potential to reach teenagers and/or young adults, Siegel explained.

“We saw a pattern that the brands that achieved the highest exposure in their advertising among youth are the brands that youth tend to drink,” he said. “Another important part of our research was that these are not necessarily just the same brands that adults drink. One could argue that the reason we are seeing this connection is that adults are also seeing the advertising, and they’re drinking the most heavily advertised brands — and so kids are going to copy the adults, but we found out that’s not the case.”

While there are select brands that are popular among both adults and teens, there are several brands of alcohol that are not popular among adults but are very popular among youth and vice-versa, Siegel explained. But during this study, the researchers didn’t look at whether or not popular brands among teens appeal to a younger audience with the content of their advertising.

“We just looked at whether or not young people were exposed to the ads, but we did do another study in which we found that brands that are popular among young people do have a greater youth appeal. So, I do believe there’s evidence that these brands are not only the ones that young people are more exposed to, but the themes and messages that the brands are sending are more appealing to that population of youth.”

The researchers also found that underage consumption was significantly associated with the number of ‘likes’ a brand had on their Facebook page, their overall market share and the number of drinks that could be purchased with five dollars. Underage consumption declined as the average price for drinks of specific brands became more expensive.

Siegel and his team concluded that their findings highlight that advertising influences not only particular behaviors but also the drinking choices of

underage drinkers, thus the industry should move toward addressing the problem.

“We think that if we educate kids so they understand that the industry is basically out to get them, almost recruiting them to drink even though they are not of age to drink, they will be more resistant to those advertising messages. We also think the federal government should consider regulations to try to reduce youth exposure to alcohol advertising.”