

U.S. alcohol ads largely comply with standards: study

By Andrew M. Seaman

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(Reuters Health) - Advertising for alcoholic beverages in magazines is largely in line with rules set by the U.S. government and industry, though in some cases just barely, according to a new study.

Researchers found that about 99 percent of the alcohol ads in magazines between 2008 and 2010 met federal standards. About 98 percent were also compliant with industry standards.

"In our paper one of our main findings is that the content is largely adherent to federal and industry codes but it's still very problematic," said Katherine Smith, the study's lead author.

Smith is an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

For example, she said, many of the ads included images of women in very little clothing and objectified positions.

But the ads must feature "explicit and unambiguous offensive text or images" to be judged noncompliant, Smith and her colleagues write in the American Journal of Public Health.

"Essentially, what we're saying is that the regulations are so ambiguous that compliance is largely a non-issue," Smith told Reuters Health.

"We care about magazine advertising because we know that exposure to alcohol marketing increases the likelihood young people will start drinking," she said. "And if they are drinking, that they'll drink more."

For the new study, the researchers reviewed 1,785 ads that appeared 7,634 times in national magazines in the U.S. between 2008 and 2010, according to The Nielsen Company.

The ads were for beer, spirits and so-called alcopop products, which include bottled flavored alcoholic drinks. They did not look at wine advertisements.

The ads were then judged against federal and industry standards.

Federal standards prohibit ads from making false claims intended to deceive and cannot include statements and representations judged to be obscene or indecent, according to the researchers. The ads also can't contain health, purity or strength claims - depending on the type of alcohol.

Industry standards set by the Beer Institute and the Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S. also prohibit overt sexual activity, promiscuity, gratuitous nudity, degrading images, excessive or irresponsible consumption and illegal activity, among other things.

About 76 percent of the reviewed ads were for spirits, 23 percent were for beer and less than 1 percent were for alcopop products.

Overall, only about 1 percent of the ads were in violation of federal standard and about 2 percent violated industry standards.

The researchers found, however, there were a number of ads that contained "questionable content."

For instance, they said, ads often aligned alcohol with success. In one case, an ad equated a person's success with how much alcohol they consume - ranging from a clown with 4 ounces (oz) of beer to a secret agent with 25.4 oz.

Another example included an ad for vodka that showed a woman in a short and sheer skirt kneeling on a bed with a man behind her. It included text that read: Discover the purity.

"From a public health perspective, I think ads that focus on the product's qualities rather than focus on lifestyle attributes to the product would be preferential," Smith said.

"Over 98% of the ads the researchers reviewed met their own arbitrary and capacious criteria," Frank Coleman, a spokesperson for the Distilled Spirits Council, wrote to Reuters Health in an email.

"They clearly state: 'Advertisements largely adhered to existing regulations and codes,'" he said. "One can only conclude that this was a colossal waste of scarce taxpayer health care dollars."

The new study is part of ongoing research from the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth (CAMY). The center is supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to David Jernigan, the study's senior author and director of CAMY.

"As our analysis showed, existing alcohol advertising standards, even if adhered to, continue to allow ads encouraging risky behavior," Jernigan wrote to Reuters Health in an email. "This risky behavior leads to 4700 deaths and \$27 billion in health care costs from underage drinking every year. Strengthening the standards and reducing the risky behavior is a wise investment."

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