
Editor's Corner: The Role of Public Health Surveillance in Protecting Young People From Alcohol Marketing

EVIDENCE HAS BEEN MOUNTING that the alcoholic beverage industry is not adhering to its self-regulation guidelines. These self-imposed codes of responsible marketing are supposed to protect vulnerable populations, particularly children and adolescents, from the potential negative effects of alcohol advertising. But their main purpose may be quite the opposite: to allow producers to market their products unencumbered by statutory regulations and to absolve them of responsibility for the harm caused to underage drinkers by their products.

The study by Ross et al. (2016) in this issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* is as valuable for its substantive findings as it is for its methodological contributions to the science of alcohol policy. During the period of the study (2005–2012), the alcohol industry spent \$7.5 billion placing 2,461,999 advertisements on television, of which 7.7% were telecast on programs that exceeded the alcohol industry's underage composition guidelines (i.e., were noncompliant).

Why is it important to study the activities of the alcohol industry? As the authors explain, alcohol advertising influences youth drinking by associating alcohol with desirable attributes and enjoyable activities, such as parties, celebrations, sports, and recreation. Not only is there growing evidence to support this contention, there are plausible explanations (e.g., social cognitive theory, alcohol expectancy theory) that provide a convincing case for the mechanisms involved in how advertising contributes to excessive drinking in young people. Many studies have found that alcohol advertising changes attitudes toward alcohol, promotes positive expectancies of alcohol use, and increases both intentions to drink and subsequent drinking behavior.

Although the alcoholic beverage industry does not agree with these conclusions, paradoxically the industry does endorse the need to protect vulnerable populations from exposure to alcohol marketing. Indeed, the industry has disseminated its self-regulation codes globally to define exposure markets and types of advertising content that must be avoided by responsible members of the industry. To support the self-regulation codes, they have established a complaint

process and an adjudication mechanism to demonstrate that they are “good corporate citizens.”

The Ross et al. (2016) study is about television advertising, which has been studied extensively and found to be ineffectively controlled by the industry's self-regulation guidelines. As the entertainment and communication preferences of modern society have shifted to social media, so have alcohol marketing campaigns. Does the industry do any better here, given the disproportionate use of social media by youth?

A recently published study by Barry et al. (2015) assessed the extent to which alcohol companies restrict adolescents' access and exposure to their marketing on Twitter and Instagram. Fictitious users of smartphones whose demographic profiles represented vulnerable population groups could fully access, view, and interact with alcohol industry content posted on the two social media platforms. The authors concluded that the alcohol industry is in violation of their self-regulation guidelines for digital marketing communications on Instagram. Although Twitter's age-gate effectively blocked direct-to-phone updates, unhindered access to post was possible. After registering with the company site, the fictitious young persons, some portrayed to be as young as 13, were bombarded with alcohol industry messages and promotional material.

Both studies provide a good example of public health surveillance, a time-honored approach to disease prevention that uses appropriate monitoring capabilities to generate data that can be used by policymakers. It can serve as an early-warning system, document the impact of an intervention, and suggest policy changes.

Recently, one prominent alcohol producer announced that it would invest at least \$1 billion (U.S.) in dedicated social marketing campaigns and related programs to reduce harmful drinking, including underage drinking. This comes from a company found to be a consistent violator of industry self-regulation guidelines regarding alcohol marketing to college students on television (Babor et al., 2013) and brand placements in movies rated for youth as young as 13 years (Bergamini et al., 2013).

To the extent that public health surveillance methods are now available, it is time for alcohol scientists and public health agencies, including the World Health Organization and the U.S. National Institutes of Health, to recognize that the long-neglected “elephant in the room” needs to be monitored systematically using the tools of social and behavioral science. Industry self-regulation of marketing has been found to be ineffective as a way to protect vulnerable populations from alcohol marketing. More stringent policy options are now being implemented in some countries and considered in others. Finland recently issued a statutory ban on digital marketing of alcohol products, and other countries (e.g., Norway, France, Thailand) have banned marketing on traditional media. The world public health community is working toward a global approach to the problem. A total ban on alcohol marketing would be the preferred option, ideally supported by an international Framework Convention on Alcohol Marketing. These measures are consistent with current thinking about the universal rights of children, which include freedom from commercial marketing of harmful products.

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