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Alcohol adverts may be in breach of advertising code, study finds

A study of young drinkers' responses to alcohol advertising has found that not only are current advertisements highly appealing to young people, they appear to use actors under the age of 25 – in direct contravention of the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code.

Researchers from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at UNSW Sydney, Turning Point of Monash University, and the National Drug Research Institute (NDRI) at Curtin University, sampled the views of 351 heavy drinkers (who often consumed 11 or more standard drinks per drinking occasion) aged 16 to 19 years old. Sixty eight of the sample were also shown six current print and online advertisements for different types of drinks including beer, cider, wine, whiskey and sweet liqueur.

In light of the results the authors have called for an urgent review and revision of the alcohol advertising codes.

Alcohol advertising requires actors to be at least 25 years-of-age and to be clearly depicted as adults, to ensure there is no ambiguity about characters being below the legal drinking age. In contrast, the study published today in *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* (ANZJPH) found that over half of the 351 young participants thought that actors always or usually appeared to be under 25 years of age. A further 21 per cent thought they sometimes appeared to be under 25. Of the 68 participants who took part in in-depth interviews looking at specific advertisements, 94 per cent thought the character in a liqueur advertisement was under 25 years-old. Almost 30 per cent thought the advert was marketed at people less than 18 years-of-age.

In the study, the apple cider and liqueur advertisements were rated most often as 'very' or 'quite' appealing (60 per cent and 44 per cent, respectively).

For example, the liqueur ad was associated with attractiveness, partying, and being fashionable: "If you are a girl, it will make you look hot like her. If you are a man, you can buy these drinks for girls who look like her" (Female, 19), "You look fun; you are up for a good night" (Male, 17), "It'll taste good, it looks pretty and it's cool, yeah" (Female, 18).

Dr Tina Lam, NDRI Research Fellow and co-author of the study said the results were concerning.

"The majority of the 351 participants reported regular exposure to alcohol advertising, particularly on television, outdoor billboards and at festivals," said Dr Lam.

“This study draws directly on the views of young people, rather than relying on the views of experts or researchers, to understand the ways in which alcohol adverts are perceived.

“The young people’s responses support a large body of research indicating that young people regularly perceive messages that alcohol enhances mood or confers some social benefit. The perceptions of these young people are also in line with public health expert assessments that the voluntary industry-managed codes are frequently breached.

“The results of the study provide further impetus for a thorough review and revision of alcohol advertising codes and processes of adjudication, as has been recommended by experts and government bodies internationally”

Aiken A, Lam T, Gilmore W, Burns L, Chikritzhs T, Lenton S, Lloyd B, Lubman D, Ogeil R, Allsop S. In press. Youth perceptions of alcohol advertising in Australia: Are current advertising regulations working? Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health. doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.12792

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