

Binge drinking: is early exposure to alcohol ads to blame?



Written by

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The alcohol industry must act now to safeguard children's physical and mental health

Advertising is all around us whether on TV and billboards, online, or in magazines and newspapers. But does all this exposure to advertising cause actual harm, especially to those more vulnerable in our society?

The [Kids' Cam](#) project in New Zealand revealed children are exposed to alcohol marketing around 12 times a day. The study was conducted among 168 children, aged 11-13 years old. The children wore cameras for four days, capturing what they saw every seven seconds. Researchers found the [packaging and branding](#) of alcoholic drinks were a key source of exposure to alcohol advertising in the home. It was also noted there was no strong distinction between the packaging of soft drinks and alcohol.

Previous research by the [Kids' Cam project in 2014](#) found children were exposed to an average of 4.5 alcohol ads per day through sports sponsorship, shop front signage and visits to the supermarket. [Growing evidence](#) shows this exposure encourages young people to start drinking alcohol earlier, binge drink and develop long term habits; over half of children in New Zealand aged 15-17 consume alcohol, and close to eight per cent drink hazardously.

The research also revealed the highest exposure to alcohol marketing was at home and through sports sponsorship via sports heroes and their merchandise, as well as in traditional health-promoting environments such as sports venues.

Reducing advertising exposure

With the highest exposure to alcohol marketing being in the home, it's arguable parents should be the ones to make the decision on how best to safeguard their children. But a major problem is parents cannot fully protect their children when the alcohol industry is able to permeate into the home via media such as sports sponsorship and merchandise.

Additional measures are required to further restrict the amount of advertising children are exposed to. For example, alcohol companies could be removed as sponsors of the top sports tournaments and replaced with other streams of revenue.

In Australia the revenue generated from the alcopops tax is directed into sports sponsorship replacement programmes, while alcohol brands have been outbid by health neutral companies in some of the country's most popular leagues

Research has shown that having alcohol so readily available in supermarkets normalises as a commodity, increasing children's exposure to it

France has already implemented a blanket ban on alcohol sponsorship of sports and cultural events with the [Évin Law](#), which applies to drinks over 1.2 per cent alcohol by volume. The law also includes a ban on alcohol marketing on television and in cinemas. This ban has been successful and allowed other companies to step in but the law has since weakened.

The World Health Organization (WHO) provides guidance for [the most effective alcohol control policies](#), including alcohol marketing, taxation and regulation of the availability of alcohol. Research has shown that having alcohol so readily available in supermarkets normalises it as a commodity, increasing children's exposure to it. The Kids' Cam study also revealed children are exposed to alcohol advertising on 85 per cent of their visits to [supermarkets](#), showing the current legislation aiming to safeguard consumers is failing.

As young people are very influenced by how a product looks, packaging provides a big opportunity for health promotion. To date, there has been some inclusion of health warnings on alcohol packaging: for example, those aimed at pregnant women. But this hasn't been sufficient as the warnings tend not to be clearly visible on the packaging. Changes to cigarette packaging have already shown how health promotion on packaging can help to influence change, as the majority of 15-25 years olds are non-smokers.

Industry call to action

There have been calls for legislative restrictions on alcohol marketing such as the [WHO's Global Alcohol Strategy](#) in 2010. In 2014, New Zealand's [Ministerial Forum on Alcohol Advertising & Sponsorship](#) recommended a complete ban on alcohol sponsorship of sport. However, to date the industry has failed to follow codes of conduct in multiple countries, and self-regulation of alcohol marketing has proven ineffective.

Industry self-regulation up till now has mainly focused on traditional broadcast and non-broadcast media like TV, radio and print, rather than emerging forms of promotion, like online marketing. Countries such as Norway, Lithuania and Russia have demonstrated it's possible to strictly regulate online marketing of alcohol. There, the only place you can see alcohol marketing is on distribution websites made for alcohol retailers.

More should also be done to inform consumers about the risks of consumption. Alcohol is a [Type 1 carcinogenic](#) and the risk of drinking a bottle of wine a week is equivalent to smoking five and 10 cigarettes for men and women respectively. Yet, there is a lack of information about this risk or even simple nutritional information which is mandated on other food and beverage products which consumers have a right to know.

Young people are susceptible to harm from drinking alcohol due to their developing brains and lack of awareness of the consumption risks, and early onset drinking can result in serious psychological and physical damage. Whatever steps are taken, whether through self-regulation or legislation, the industry must act now to protect young people's health.

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Tim Chambers is a Research Associate in the Centre for Health Economics and Policy Innovation in the Department of Management & Entrepreneurship, Imperial College Business School. His specific research interests focus on environmental features that impact on children's health, including food marketing and availability, alcohol marketing, greenspace and physical activity.

He joined Imperial in 2018 working on the Science & Technology in Childhood Obesity Policy (STOP) project. His current research focuses on establishing the best policies to reduce childhood obesity.