

Health Brief: Minors may be inundated with alcohol ads via social media

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- Barry AE, et al. Alcohol Alcohol. Nov. 22, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1Ri8bog>.

Studies have shown that alcohol advertising can influence youths' decisions to start drinking. Alcohol ads and promotions are accessible to children on social media, despite industry guidelines calling for self-imposed restrictions on marketing to minors, according to a recent study.

Studies have shown that alcohol advertising can influence youths' decisions to start drinking. Although industry guidelines state that alcohol ads should be placed where the majority of the audience is of legal purchase age, evidence shows ads are placed during TV shows and in magazines with a large percentage of underage viewers/readers.



Furthermore, data from the Federal Trade Commission show more money now is being spent to advertise alcoholic beverages on digital media than traditional media. Therefore, the authors of this study sought to determine if minors are receiving such ads on their social media accounts.

Researchers set up 20 fictitious user profiles on Instagram and Twitter for males and females ages 13, 15, 17, 19 and 21. Then, they looked at whether the profiles could view the official pages of 22 alcoholic brands on smartphones as well as interact with the pages (retweet, like, view a video, comment). They also determined whether the profiles could follow and receive updates from the brands' pages.

Results showed that all user profiles were able access, view and interact with alcohol industry content posted on Instagram and Twitter. Twitter's "age-gate" technology, which requires users to enter a birthdate, successfully prevented underage profiles from following official pages and subsequently receiving promotional materials on their smartphones, but Instagram did not.

The users received an average of 362 Instagram ads on their phones in 30 days. The two profiles of legal age received an average of 918 Twitter promotions during the month, with the number of ads peaking on Thursdays and Fridays.

Researchers also found that company representatives of Instagram accounts responded directly to questions and comments from underage youths.

These findings, the authors concluded, highlight the ineffectiveness of age-gate technology and the need for research on how the alcohol industry is using social media to market their products.

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