

ALCOHOL ADVERTISING & MEDIA LITERACY: A SCIENCE-BASED REVIEW

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The Problems Created By Advertising

Advertising exerts a key influence on the formation of children's expectancies toward engaging in risky behaviors. An example where this is strongly documented is the relation between advertising and youth's attitudes towards drinking.

American alcohol companies reported \$1.75 Billion in advertising on traditional media (TV, radio, print, outdoor) buys in 2005 (Adams Beverage Group, 2006). If non-traditional media is included (events, promotions, internet, paraphernalia) it is estimated that this figures triples (Advertising Age Data Center, n.d.). The impact of alcohol advertising on youth can be measured down to the number of ads seen and dollars spent. Snyder, et al. (2006) reported that greater exposure to alcohol advertising contributes to an increase in drinking among underage youth. Specifically, for each additional ad a young person saw (above the monthly youth average of 23), he or she drank 1% more. For each additional dollar per capita spent on alcohol advertising in a local market (above the national average of \$6.80 per capita), young people drank 3% more.

Goldman (n.d.), citing Dunn and Goldman (1998), wrote on the NIAAA sponsored website, Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free website:

Children begin to acquire alcohol expectancies at a very young age (perhaps as young as 3 or 4 years old). In early childhood, alcohol expectancies tend to be negative (e.g., alcohol makes one sick, mean, and argumentative). However, by fifth and sixth grade, these expectancies turn positive, focusing on the arousing and positive effects of alcohol use (e.g., alcohol makes one social, happy, and sexy). Thus, alcohol expectancies are largely positive by the time experimentation with alcohol begins.

It commonly held that the reason children move from having negative to positive alcohol expectancies is in large part due to alcohol advertising. Chen and Grube (2001) report that 5th through 11th grade students who are exposed to and enjoy alcohol advertisements have more favorable beliefs about drinking and say they are more likely to drink in the future and consume more alcohol.

Media Literacy as a Solution

Media literacy is a concept related to an awareness of the impact of media messages on our conscious and unconscious choices. Children who understand that the media are not real are less likely to adopt unhealthy attitudes or behaviors that are depicted in the media (Huston, Donnerstein, Fairchild, et al, 1992; Singer, Zuckerman & Singer, 1980; Dorr, Graves & Phelps, 1980). Studies of media literacy programs have been shown to be effective in increasing children's critical viewing skills of advertising (Roberts, Christenson, Gibson, Moser & Goldberg, 1980; Feshbach, Feshbach & Cohen, 1982). Slater, et. al. (1996) found that classes about resistance to advertisers' persuasive appeals have both short and long term effects. Exposure to such classes predicts cognitive resistance and counter-arguing of persuasive beer advertisements months and years after completion of the class (1996). Many other countries, including Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and several Latin American nations have successfully incorporated media education into school curricula (Brown, 1991).

Studies directly relating media literacy and alcohol advertising found a change in children's intention to drink alcohol after a media education program (Austin & Johnson, 1997). Results showed that 3rd graders given media literacy training around alcohol ads showed significant attitudinal changes. They were less likely to rate alcohol ads positively, were less attracted to alcohol promotional material, and

showed greater disdain for alcohol commercials. Dr. DeBenedittis replicated this study using his alcohol prevention media literacy lessons in presentations to 8th graders, finding a significant change in their positive attitudes towards alcohol consumption taking place after a single 45-minute presentation. (DeBenedittis, 2000)

Researchers looking at 9th and 12th graders found that “the potential risk of frequent exposure to persuasive alcohol portrayals via late-night talk shows, sports, music videos, and prime-time television for underage drinking is moderated by parental reinforcement and counter-reinforcement of messages” (Austin, Pinkleton & Fujioka, 2000). This research suggests that giving parents and students the media literacy skills to “talk back” to television reduces underage drinking. Recent research has provided further empirical support for the benefit of media literacy education by demonstrating that such education programs predicted alcohol use at a two-year follow-up (Epstein, et al. 2007).

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