Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Factsheet

Media and marketing's influence on drug and alcohol use

Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Drugs (General), Electronic Cigarettes/Vaping, Tobacco

Tags: media, marketing, alcohol, social media

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Introduction

Young people often see alcohol and other drug use in the media, such as:

- Ads
- News
- Movies
- TV shows
- Social media

Seeing substances on these platforms can go on to influence a young person's own use.

Advertising

Does advertising affect use?

There are lots of alcohol ads on television, the internet, social media, and on billboards. When young people see alcohol marketing, they are more likely to drink at a younger age. The more alcohol ads they see, the more likely they are to drink alcohol. This doesn't mean that all young people who see alcohol ads will drink alcohol. Instead, it means that they are more likely to drink than if they didn't see the ads. Alcohol ads also raise the chance of young people drinking at risky levels.

Young Australians also often see e-cigarette/vape advertising, even though there are regulations that ban these ads, with some exceptions for pharmacies. Common places are e-cigarette/vape shops, tobacconists, corner shops, and on social media. Like with alcohol, young people who see e-cigarette ads are more likely to go on to use e-cigarettes, than those who don't see the ads.

Marketing techniques

The effects of advertising on alcohol and e-cigarette use may be due to the marketing techniques advertisers use. Advertisers want their ads to be persuasive so that they sell more products. However, there is evidence that alcohol is a top contributor to injury, disability and poor health among young people. Given the serious impacts ofalcohol and e-cigarettes on young people, medical experts are fighting for stronger rules and laws to stop this type of advertising.

Advertisers use persuasive marketing techniques to make their products appealing. They want people to think the product will improve their mood, give them confidence, and make them popular. Some common techniques are:

- Linking the product with social status, glamourous lifestyles or sporting achievements
- Using a spokesperson that their target audience is likely to admire
- Sponsoring sports or music events

What are the rules?

National legislation limits tobacco and e-cigarette advertising in Australia. There are also laws about plain packaging and limits on flavours and colours, to make these products less appealing. There are some exceptions for pharmaceutical e-cigarettes available with a prescription.

In contrast, alcohol advertising is mainly controlled through the Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC). The ABAC is a set of guidelines created and managed by the alcohol industry itself. The ABAC regulates alcohol ads on TV. It bans ads during children's shows or times when children are likely to be watching. However, these rules often don't cover the shows or times teenagers are watching TV. They also don't include sports broadcasts on the weekend and public holidays. Alcohol ads can be played on the radio at any time.

Media (e.g., news, movies, TV shows)

Does the media affect use?

Traditional media, such as the news, movies, and TV shows, can exaggerate alcohol and other drug use. For example, TV shows showing high school partiescan make it look like 'everyone is doing it'. These portrayals make harmful behaviours such as drinking to excess seem normal, when**we know that most young people do not use alcohol or other drugs.**

Seeing alcohol in movies puts young people at greater risk of drinking at a younger age and drinking to excess.

Techniques

Traditional media usually aims to tell a story or report current events, rather than using persuasive advertising techniques. However, sometimes news media will focus on details that grab the audience's attention, known as 'clickbait'. This can lead to a focus on alcohol and other drug use.

Instead of showing a regular ad, companies can also pay money to have their products appear in shows and movies. This is called 'product placement' and can be harder to spot as it looks like it is part of the story. For example, a company might pay for a character to wear the company's clothes or drink their brand of drink.

What are the rules?

TV shows and movies are classified to help viewers know who they are suitable for. Showing drug use can lead to higher ratings. To learn more, seeclassification.gov.au.

Social media

Does social media affect use?

Young people see alcohol ads on social media, from advertisers, influencers, and their friends. Over 90% of Australians aged 16 to 17-years-old say they have seen alcohol ads on social media. The more alcohol-related content young people see on social media, the more likely they are to drink.

Techniques

Social media platforms use complex algorithms to target content based on each user's interests and friends. This means that ads on social media can be even more persuasive than traditional advertisements (e.g., on the television). Young people are more likely to see social media influencers that like similar things to them. These influencers can make products seem desirable or an important part of their lifestyle. It can be hard to tell if influencers were paid to promote a product.

Companies want users to interact with their ads, as it helps them reach more people. They might encourage users to leave a comment or tag a friend.

What are the rules?

The ABAC also manages social media advertising. It limits alcohol marketing on these platforms. Social media platforms have made policies to prevent teenagers from seeing alcohol ads. However, research has found that lots of e-cigarette/vaping-related content on social media violates the platform's policies. For example, young people, under the age of 18 can see this content. Learn more about reporting inappropriate contenthere.

As of December 2025, some social media platforms are required to prevent Australians under the age of 16 from creating or keeping an account. Learn more onthe eSafety Commissioner website.

What can we do?

Know the facts

The media, including social media, can make it seem like more young people are using substances than really are. Marketers also use this as a tactic to sell products.

Our 'How many young people in Australia use alcohol and other drugs' factsheet shares more reliable information. It is also important to remember that social media can be misleading and does not accurately represent people's lives.

Reduce exposure

Users can change the settings on their social media accounts to lower how many alcohol ads they see. They can also report inappropriate content they see on social media. The Alcohol and Drug Foundation (ADF) have prepared a guide to help change the settings and report content.

Critically evaluate messages in the media

When watching an ad on TV or social media, try to pick the tactics that advertisers use to try to sell the product. Ask:

- Who is the ad aimed at? Think about age, gender, or other lifestyle factors.
- Have they made it look like everyone is using the product? How?
- Do they want someone to feel a certain way when watching the ad? How did they do that?
- Have they used famous figures such as influencers, celebrities, or sports stars to sell the product? How does this make the viewer feel about the product?
- Does the ad reflect real life?
- What benefits does the ad show? How likely is someone to experience these? What negative effects could they experience?
- Who benefits from someone buying this product?

Advocacy

Is it ok for media and advertising to make alcohol and drugs look appealing, even though they can be harmful? People who are concerned about this issue can take action to make a change.

Social action groups like FARE put pressure on decision makers to address the issues that affect young people. They encourage young people to join.

One person might feel like their voice won't make a difference, but remember that throughout history, individuals have successfully fought for big social changes, like theright to vote or to create environmental change.

Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney. It was reviewed by a high school student and the Matilda Centre Youth Advisory Board.

A full list of the sources that informed this factsheet can be seen below.

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