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 7–8, Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Alcohol, Electronic Cigarettes/Vaping, Tobacco

Tags: prevention, alcohol, e-cigarettes, tobacco, smoking

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

Introduction

Young people are often exposed to alcohol and other drug use through the media, whether this be through advertisements, the news, fictionalised media (e.g., movies, tv shows), or social media. These exposures and advertising techniques can be very persuasive and can go on to influence a young person's own use.

Advertising

Impact of exposure to advertising

Australian teenagers can see alcohol advertising on television, the internet, social media, and on billboards. When young people see alcohol marketing, they become more likely to start drinking at a younger age. They are also more likely to drink alcohol at risky levels. **The more alcohol ads they see, the more likely they are to drink alcohol.**

Young Australians also regularly see e-cigarette/vape advertising, despite regulations. Common places are vape shops, tobacconists, corner shops, and on social media. As is the case with alcohol, seeing e-cigarette ads is linked to e-cigarette use.

Marketing techniques

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. Commonly used techniques include:

- Associating the product with glamourous lifestyles or sporting achievements
- Using a spokesperson that their target audience is likely to admire
- Sponsoring sports or music events
- Showing a person consuming the product and gaining popularity

As young people are still developing their sense of self, they may be more easily influenced by advertising techniques. They also often don't have the skills to identify the techniques advertisers use.

What are the regulations?

In Australia, alcohol advertising is regulated by both government legislation and self-regulation by the alcohol industry. Government regulation varies between states, and generally focuses on alcohol advertising by licensed venues.

The Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC) lists key standards for alcohol advertising, which are voluntary and regulated by the alcohol industry. TV broadcasters can't show alcohol ads during times children are likely to be watching, or during children's programs. However, these regulations often don't cover the shows or times teenagers are watching TV. Also, the regulations do not apply to sports broadcasts on the weekend or public holidays. Alcohol ads can be played on the radio at any time.

Tobacco and e-cigarettes generally can't be advertised in Australia. There are also laws about plain packaging and restrictions on flavours and colours, designed to reduce their appeal to young people. There are some exceptions for pharmaceutical e-cigarettes available with a prescription.

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

Impact of exposure to media

Traditional media, including the news, movies, and TV shows, can exaggerate alcohol and other drug use. For example, news reporting on cannabis use by teenagers, or TV shows showing high school parties. **They can make it seem like 'everyone is doing it' and normalise harmful behaviours such as drinking to excess.**

Alcohol is shown in over 85% of movies, and alcohol brands appear in over 40% of children's movies. Children can identify alcoholic drinks and are able to recognise brands and logos associated with alcoholic drinks from a young age. Exposure to 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, so does not use persuasive advertising techniques. However, sometimes news media will emphasise particular details of a story to capture the attention of their audience, which can lead to a focus on alcohol and other drug use. TV shows and movies can also include paid advertising or product placement.

What are the regulations?

TV shows are movies are classified to help you know who they are suitable for. Depictions of drug use can lead to higher ratings. For more information, seeclassification.gov.au.

Social Media

Impact of exposure to social media

Young people are exposed to alcohol advertising on social media, through targeted ads, influencers, and their peers. 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 they are likely to drink. There is also an association between time spent on social media and starting to sip alcohol.

Techniques

Social media platforms use complex algorithms to target content based on each user's interests and friends. This means that ads can be even more persuasive than traditional advertisements. Young people are more likely to see social media influencers that share similar interests to them. These influencers can act as spokespeople for the product, and make it seem desirable or an important part of their lifestyle. It can be hard to tell when influencers are being paid to promote a product.

Companies encourage interaction as it effects how well their ads perform. This includes encouraging users to leave a comment or tag a friend.

What are the regulations?

Advertising on social media is covered by the industry-regulated Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code (ABAC). Social media platforms have introduced policies to try to stop teenagers seeing alcohol ads.

Research has found that lots of e-cigarette/vaping-related content on social media violates the platform's policies and can be seen by people aged under 18 years old. Learn more about reporting inappropriate content here.

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 teachers do?

Correct misconceptions

The media, including social media, can make it seem like more young people are using substances than is actually the case. Marketers also use this as a tactic to sell products, which can normalise use. It's important to correct these misconceptions to help counteract peer pressure.

For an accurate overview on normative use, see our 'How many young people in Australia use alcohol and other drugs' factsheet. It is also important to discuss how social media can be misleading and does not accurately represent people's lives.

Build resistance skills

Resistance skills training is an important part of alcohol and other drug prevention education. It helps students build self-efficacy (belief in their ability to succeed in a situation) to resist pressure from peers and the media.

Well designed and evaluated classroom alcohol and other drug prevention programs typically include resistance skills. See Recommended Programs' for more information.

Reduce exposure

You can show your students how to change the settings on their social media accounts to reduce how many alcohol ads they see. The Alcohol and Drug Foundation (ADF) have prepared a guide to help.

Encourage students to critically evaluate messages in the media

Discuss some common advertisements that they see on television or social media and identify the tactics have been used to try to sell the product. Below are some questions to help start these discussions.

- Who is the ad aimed at? Consider age, gender, or other lifestyle factors.
- How have they tried to make the product appeal to that group?
- Have they made it look like everyone is using the product? How?
- Do they want you to feel a particular way when watching the ad? How did they do that?
- Have they used 'aspirational' figures such as influencers, celebrities, or sports stars to sell the product? How does this make you feel about the product?
- Does the ad reflect real life?
- Does the ad make any claims about health? How accurate are these?
- What positive effects does the ad highlight? How likely are you to experience these? What negative effects could you experience?
- Who benefits from you buying this product?

Helping young people develop the skills to critically evaluate media and ads is beneficial beyond just alcohol and substance use prevention. 'Digital health literacy' is the ability to find, evaluate, understand, and use digital health information. Research has found that young people can overestimate their digital health literacy skills, which may mean they trust unreliable information. Digital literacy is found in the Australian Curriculum across a range of learning areas.

Some structured classroom activities are available and can be integrated into alcohol and other drug education.

- https://positivechoices.org.au/teachers/Alcohol-Advertising
- https://positivechoices.org.au/teachers/ecigarettes-vaping-recognising-manipulation

An accompanying student version of this factsheet is available here.

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.

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

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