

Alcopops and Youth



The Problem

Alcopops, also known as flavored malt beverages, are sweet, carbonated drinks offered in an extensive variety of fruity flavors. Producers market alcopops as alternatives to beer, to bridge the gap between soft drinks and alcohol for youth. Alcopops are sold in single-serving cans, bottles, and pouches up to 25 ounces and range from 5% to 14% alcohol by volume. As a result of their low prices, wide availability, and marketing tactics, alcopops are very popular among youth.

Alcopops currently hold 3.5% of total beer market share in the United States. Industry reports predict that alcopop market share will continue to rise, with forecasted sales of 148 million cases in 2019, compared to 108 million cases in 2014.¹

Youth Preferences

- Major studies have found that alcopops are disproportionately consumed by youth. Some alcopop brands such as Smirnoff Malt Beverages (Diageo) and Bacardi Malt Beverages (Bacardi), are twice as likely to be consumed by youth than by adults.²
- While nearly 50% of youth drinkers reported consuming at least one alcopop within the past 30 days, only 16-20% of adults reported drinking alcopops.^{3,4}

Binge Drinking

- Supersized alcopops that contain 23.5 ounces with 12% alcohol content are equal to 4.7 drinks in a single-serving can, earning the nickname “binge-in-a-can” from state attorneys general.^{5,6} Consuming just one of these supersized alcopops constitutes a binge-drinking event.⁵
- Youth drinkers who use alcopops are four times more likely to binge drink than youth drinkers who do not use alcopops.⁴
- Binge drinking elevates blood alcohol content to a harmful level in a short period of time, often leading to alcohol-impaired driving and motor vehicle crashes, physical violence, unintentional injury, alcohol poisoning, sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancy, and neurological damage.⁷

Alcopop-Related Harm

- Binge-drinking alcopops during youth may delay or impede the brain from maturing properly into adulthood.⁸
- Youth who drink alcopops receive more alcohol-related injuries, obtain more injuries that require medical care, and engage in more physical fights than those who do not drink alcopops.⁴
- Restricted alcopop availability is associated with decreased emergency department visits in both males and females age 15-60, most significantly in youth and young adult females.⁹
- Increased shelf space for single-serving alcoholic beverages such as alcopops is associated with a rise in violent crime in the area surrounding the retailer.¹⁰

Youth-Oriented Marketing

- Alcopop brands that overexpose youth to their advertisements show disproportionate use by young drinkers.^{2,11}
- Though the alcohol industry claims Millennials are their target alcopop audience, their promotions and campaigns often inherently target youth who are years younger than the minimum legal drinking age.¹²

- Alcopop companies use youth-friendly social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to promote user engagement with alcopop brands.¹³ Social media demographics display greatest user prevalence among adolescents and young adults, resulting in youth exposure to alcopop ads.^{14, 15}
- Alcopop companies sponsor parties, sporting events, athletes, celebrities, musicians, contests, and giveaways to promote their brand among young people.¹⁶ Alcohol brands that are most popular with youth are more likely to engage in sponsorship, and to have more sponsorship deals.¹⁷

Bottom Line

Alcopops are disproportionately consumed by youth, and negatively impact health through increased drinking, injuries, and risky behavior. To reduce alcopop-related harm, the most effective alcohol policies are vital: increasing taxes, decreasing availability, and restricting advertising.

References

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