

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Alcohol Marketing in the 21st Century: New Methods, Old Problems

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**Marketing and advertising for alcoholic beverages is abundant throughout the United States and the rest of the world. Despite the fact that alcohol advertising is related to earlier initiation of drinking, higher rates of consumption, and positive expectancies among youth populations, alcohol companies continue to design new products and related campaigns with youth-friendly attributes. Alcopops and caffeinated alcoholic beverages are two particularly dangerous types of products, and new social networking technologies make direct promotion easy and voluminous. In order to stop the harm from these alcohol products and promotion, advocacy from the research community is imperative.**

**Keywords** alcohol, advertising, alcohol marketing, social networks, alcopops, caffeinated alcohol

### ALCOHOL ADVERTISING: DECADES OLD, BILLIONS SPENT

In TV ads from Seagram's 1987 Golden wine cooler campaign, Bruce Willis belted out a catchy tune while dancing on a front porch and hit on Sharon Stone as he offered her a Golden in a bar. That same year, Partnership for a Drug-Free America released its public service advertising (PSA) telling youth "This is your brain. This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?" Little did we know that nearly 25 years later, Michelob Ultra would be using world-renowned cyclist Lance Armstrong in its beer campaign by showing him enjoying a cold one after a long ride.

Alcohol remains the drug of choice for American youth (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Marketing and advertising for alcoholic beverages is abundant throughout the United States and the rest of the world. Alcohol companies still use celebrities in their campaigns and are likely to utilize multiple new technologies to promote sales of their products. The alcohol industry has also created market-specific beverages that are attractive to the youth demographic. Moreover, effective

public health policies such as restricting alcohol advertising and limiting access to youth-friendly drinks through increased prices and product bans are rare in the United States.

More exposure to alcohol advertising contributes to higher levels of risky drinking behaviors in youth: earlier initiation of drinking for youth who have not started yet and higher consumption among underage youth who drink (Anderson, de Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009). Exposure to alcohol advertising increases positive expectancies and attitudes about alcoholic beverages and drinking behaviors in youth populations (Austin & Knaus, 2000). Youth in markets with greater alcohol advertising expenditures drink more; each additional dollar spent on alcohol advertising raises the number of drinks consumed by 3% (Snyder, Milici, Slater, Sun, & Strizhakova, 2006). Advertisements promoting alcoholic beverages are pervasive, and an oversight is left to ineffective self-regulation by the alcohol industry (Gomes & Simon, 2008).

The alcohol industry spent approximately \$6 billion or more on advertising and promotion in 2005 (Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth, 2010). In 2008, beer and spirits producers spent more than \$550 million on advertising for their top selling brands in the United States. Table 1 lists 2008 advertising budgets allotted by brand.

More than half of the general advertising market share in 2008 was spent on various types of television (network, cable, spot TV, and syndication) and another 40% on newspaper and magazines (TNS Media Intelligence, 2010). In addition to these traditional media channels, alcohol producers also use new media that emerged as important tools during the last 5 years. These new social network media cost very little to employ and can increase product exposure to specific target audiences—especially youth—exponentially.

### ALCOHOL ADVERTISING IN NEW MEDIA

In the last 5 years, social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have emerged as major players in alcohol marketing campaigns. The frontrunner,

TABLE 1. Advertising expenditures for top beer and spirits brands in 2008

Parent company	Brand	Expenditures
Anheuser-Busch	Bud Light	\$148.8 million
Anheuser-Busch	Budweiser	\$124.2 million
MillerCoors, LLC	MillerLite	\$109.2 million
MillerCoors, LLC	Coors Light	\$107.3 million
Pernod-Ricard	Absolut	\$27.3 million
Bacardi	Bacardi	\$16.3 million
Diageo	Captain Morgan	\$13.9 million
Diageo	Smirnoff	\$6.8 million

Source: Beverage Information Group (2009).

Facebook, has more than 400 million active user accounts (Facebook, 2010a). Facebook offers ad space that companies can purchase to advertise alcohol products, sponsored events, and brand-related content. Facebook also offers other opportunities such as fan pages to promote products; event pages to invite users to sponsored parties, contests, or other events; applications made by third-party developers to play games and interact with other users; and pages where users can create their own groups of users and communicate with them. All of these opportunities are free and easy to use.

In addition, Facebook policies regarding alcohol advertising and alcohol-related content throughout the platform sidestep any direct responsibility. The policies say that creators of the pages and applications should use “age-gating” techniques to restrict access to the alcohol-related Facebook pages to users aged 21 years and older in the United States, yet Facebook does not monitor or enforce the policy. Many of the thousands of alcohol-related fan pages, event and group pages, and applications on Facebook are accessible by users under the legal drinking age (Mart, Mergendoller, & Simon, 2009).

The main goal of social media tactics for alcohol ad campaigns is to encourage positive word-of-mouth about the product from members of social networks to others in their networks. Every activity by a user that somehow mentions or references an alcohol product—whether a status update, wall post, event reply, application, group message, tweet, or video—communicates about the product to members of the user’s network. As long as the messages portrayed about the product throughout the social medium are favorable, they build positive attitudes about the brand and friendly community between the users who communicate about the alcohol product.

Alcohol companies also use media such as text messages, cell phone and smartphone applications, downloadable ringtones, and wallpaper backgrounds from their product web sites in addition to social networking platforms to spread their messages. Anheuser-Busch InBev used T-Pain in a Bud Light Superbowl commercial and offered free, downloadable ringtones with his Bud Light jingle and wallpaper with images from the ad. Diageo’s “Be There” campaign for Smirnoff vodka includes a Twitter account that promotes product-related contests, dance

parties in locations around the world, and online drink recipes. All of these media are widely used to promote types of drinks that are popular with youth audiences: alcopops and caffeinated alcohol.

### PROMOTING YOUTH-FRIENDLY PRODUCTS: ALCOPOPS AND CAFFEINE

New media such as social networks and text messages are not the only changes in recent years, as the alcohol industry has made some new categories of alcohol products popular with youth and young adults as well. One such category is alcopops. Alcopops are ready-to-drink, sugary sweet alcoholic beverages, often carbonated and/or fruit-flavored, and sold in single serving bottles or cans. In both their liquid form and packaging, alcopops resemble soda or other soft drinks. Alcopops can contain the same amount of alcohol as beer (about 5%), although some are as high as 8%–12% alcohol by volume. The alcohol industry calls these drinks “flavored malt beverages,” “malternatives,” and “flavored alcoholic beverages” (Marin Institute, 2009). They are a go-to alcoholic beverage choice marketed to youth, particularly young girls.

One survey reported that about one-third of teenage girls responding had tried alcopops and more than 60% of teen girls who saw TV, print, or in-store ads for alcopops had also tried the beverages (American Medical Association, 2004). Alcopops ads tended to be the only way by which teen girls become aware of the products, as more than 50% of the teens who saw the ads did not report seeing alcopop products anywhere else such as at parties or with friends. One-third of survey respondents said that they thought alcopops had less alcohol content than beer or similar products.

Some leading alcopops brands and their producers include Mike’s Hard Lemonade (Mike’s Hard Beverage), Smirnoff Twisted V and Smirnoff Ice (Diageo), and Bacardi Silver (Anheuser-Busch InBev/Bacardi) (Beverage Information Group, 2009). These companies use contests, sponsorships, traditional, and social media to sell their products to youth. The Mike’s Hard Lemonade Facebook fan page, with nearly 12,000 fans, showcases the “Mike’s Hard Punch Sweepstakes.” Clicking on the sweepstakes link takes the user to the related web site, which has no age-gating entry page to deter underage Internet users. Both the company’s Facebook fan page and its own web site list prizes of free music downloads from Warner Brothers Music, with all entries automatically submitted for big prizes such as a trip to London, a Les Paul guitar, a Warner Brothers Rock Gift Package, and Mike’s “Hard Punch Rocks” t-shirts.

In another product development twist, soon after the Red Bull energy drink arrived in 1997, alcohol companies began adding caffeine and other stimulants such as guarana to alcohol products. Caffeinated alcohol is associated with high levels of dangerous drinking behaviors and related negative consequences in youth and college student populations. Recent research has found that a quarter of college student drinkers mix energy drinks with

alcohol and that students who do so are at a higher risk of alcohol-related harm, including physical injuries, injuries requiring medical treatment, being the victim or perpetrator of sexual violence, and riding with an intoxicated driver (O'Brien, McCoy, Rhodes, Wagoner, & Wolfson, 2008). Additional research found that youth drinkers aged 14–20 years who mixed alcohol with energy drinks did so in order to hide the flavor of alcohol, drink more, not look as drunk, and stay awake longer (Song, Wolfson, O'Brien, Wagoner, & Martin, 2008). These youth were at a higher risk for heavy drinking and alcohol-related harm such as violence and driving while intoxicated, than youth who drank alcohol alone (Song et al., 2008). Finally, college students who consumed alcohol along with energy drinks at bars were four times more likely to intend to drive upon leaving the bar than those who did not mix alcohol and energy drinks (Thombs et al., 2009).

Despite the serious health risks and problems posed, producers continue to target young people directly with both their products and ad campaigns. The products target youth with names such as JOOSE, Tilt, Spiked Core, Max Vibe, Torque, Hard Wired, Evil Eye, Vicious Vodka, Slingshot Party Gel, and 3AM Vodka. Most follow the alcopops model and make their products sugary sweet, with fruit flavors such as fruit punch, blue raspberry, and grape (Four Loko, 2010) as well as orange, watermelon, and green apple (Joose, 2010). The added flavors easily mask the high alcohol levels of as much as 12% alcohol. The cans and bottles are brightly colored and are often confused with soft drinks. The volume of many cans is nearly twice as much as other single-serving alcoholic beverages (23.5 or 24 ounces versus a 12 or 16 ounce beer), thus making it easier to hide the flavor of alcohol and encourage more drinking.

The promotion of these drinks is predictable, whether it comes from the companies that make the product or those who drink it: “consumer educators” (young, beautiful women giving away free product-related merchandise or free samples of the product at bars, sponsored parties, or on campus); contests with big prizes such as trips, sports or music equipment, or cash; branded merchandise such as clothing; and social media including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. While Facebook policy states that only representatives of a product or company may create Facebook pages for their product or business, there is no way to tell whether a company officially authorizes or creates a page for promoting their product (Mart et al., 2009). Even when social networking pages for products are not created by alcohol companies themselves but by the young Facebook or YouTube users, the companies still benefit from thousands of messages about their products floating into their target audience’s consciousness. Young users post messages that mix product promotion, boasting about risky behaviors and harm they personally experience from drinking the products, such as “love me some JOOSE! at the beach, out skating, in a car, at the movies, walking around in broad daylight, JOOSE is everywhere i want to be, and cops dont realize its not just an energy drink or

arizona lmao” or “i like jungle joose leave it alone but if u want the 9.9 without all the jungleness find the mamba joose taste like punch.” Another Joose user shared “amazing, our vomiting and breaking of furniture rates at parties have skyrocketed” (Facebook, 2010c). One Four Loko fan reported “I turned 3 people on to lemonade Loko tonight! I need some commission,” while another posted “i think they should change the label to ‘delicious death in a can’” (Facebook, 2010b).

Recently, state attorneys general have questioned producers of caffeinated alcohol. As a result of these investigations over the last 3 years, Anheuser-Busch InBev and MillerCoors agreed to reformulate their respective products to remove stimulants. In November 2009, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) called for nearly 30 manufacturers to provide the agency evidence that consuming alcoholic beverages with added caffeine or other stimulants is safe. A year later, after concluding its review, the FDA ruled that caffeine is an unsafe food additive to alcohol. Meanwhile, nineteen states (Alabama, Georgia, New Jersey, Washington, Illinois, California, Iowa, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Vermont, Hawaii, Virginia, Rhode Island, Tennessee, New York, South Dakota, Texas, Maryland, and Pennsylvania) have introduced legislation since 2010 to ban caffeinated alcoholic beverages from being produced, distributed, or sold in those states. The risks to public health are far from over, however: Since the FDA ruling, some companies have removed the caffeine from their alcohol products while keeping the sweet flavors, high alcohol content, youth-oriented marketing, and supersized single-serving containers.

#### CONTINUED RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY ARE NEEDED

Although the marketing methods and products over the years may have changed, the same problem remains: alcohol producers bombard young people with messages to drink. Meanwhile, the scientific evidence is clear and continues to grow: restricting alcohol advertising and decreasing the prevalence of youth-oriented alcohol products are some of the most cost-effective policies available to affect significant reductions in alcohol consumption and incidence of alcohol-related harm (Anderson, Chisholm, & Fuhr, 2009). Measures such as banning harmful alcohol products and restricting youth-oriented advertising practices are important and necessary. To support these effective, evidence-based strategies, researchers can conduct and share the results of studies documenting the amounts and types of damage experienced by young people that are related to caffeinated alcohol, alcopops, and youth-oriented alcohol advertising.

Researchers also play an important role in advocating for evidence-based policies, providing testimony at legislative hearings to support public health needs, and sharing their expertise on the issues with the press and mass media. Researchers at the University of Maryland College Park and Wake Forest University are excellent examples of such advocacy: not only they have published

and presented research regarding the increased negative consequences, excessive drinking behaviors, and other risks associated with youth consumption of alcohol mixed with energy drinks, but they also shared their concerns about the issue with attorneys general and made in-depth reviews of the literature on this topic available to them (Arria, O'Brien, Goldberger, Griffiths, & Miller, 2009). We need more of this kind of crucial research leadership in the public health arena so that we can reverse the path we have traveled in the last two decades: alcohol companies using more new methods to target youth, with excessive amounts of promotion for products that harm the health of youth and their communities. Together, researchers, advocates, and youth can stand up and resist the marketing and lobbying power of the alcohol industry.

### Declaration of Interest

The author reports no conflicts of interest. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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