

## **BMJ OPEN**

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**Subjects: People**

### **Alcohol marketing awareness linked to 'higher risk' drinking among UK teens**

*While ownership of branded merchandise is linked to future intentions to try alcohol among never drinkers*

Medium to high awareness of alcohol marketing among UK teens is linked to increased consumption and a greater probability of 'higher risk' drinking among current drinkers, finds a large observational study published in the online journal **BMJ Open**.

And ownership of branded alcohol merchandise is linked to future intentions ('susceptibility') to try alcohol among never drinkers, the findings show.

'360 degree' marketing strategies have created a range of ways in which young people can be exposed to alcohol marketing, and it may now be time to look at how this level of exposure could be reduced, suggest the researchers.

They wanted to see if there might be any link between alcohol marketing and drinking patterns/intentions among a representative sample of UK teens.

They drew on information supplied by 3,399 11 to 19-year olds who responded to the 2017 Youth Alcohol Policy Survey. Three-quarters (76%) were below 18, the legal age for buying alcohol. Most lived in England, with their parents or other family members, and were in some form of education. The teens were asked how often, if at all, they had seen marketing for alcohol over the past month in nine different channels, ranging from billboards, TV and magazines, to social media and sport and event sponsorship.

Their responses for each of the nine channels were scored from 1 to 6, where 1 equals every day and 6 equals not in the past month. The scores were used to approximate total marketing awareness over the preceding month.

The teens were also asked if they owned any branded alcohol merchandise. And they were asked how much and how often they drank alcohol. Their responses were categorised according to the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test-Consumption (AUDIT-C).

Susceptibility to trying alcohol was classified as the absence of a firm intention not to do so in response to the question: 'Do you think you will drink alcohol at any time during the next year?'

The responses showed that almost half the weighted sample were current drinkers, and almost half of these (707; 44%) were classified as 'higher risk' drinkers, with an AUDIT-C score of 5 or higher.

At least half the sample recalled 32 instances of alcohol marketing within the past month, with one in 10 of the sample reporting daily or nearly daily awareness from three of the nine marketing channels. The most common sources of marketing awareness were TV adverts, celebrity endorsements, and special offers, with more than a third of respondents saying that they had noticed marketing through these channels at least weekly.

Levels of awareness were classified as low—16 or fewer instances in the past month (35% of the sample); medium—17 to 53 instances (32%); and high—54+(34%).

Among those below the legal age for buying alcohol these proportions were, respectively, 38%, 31%, and 32%.

After taking account of known influential factors, medium and high levels of alcohol marketing awareness were associated with a higher AUDIT-C score and a greater likelihood of higher risk drinking.

Nearly a fifth (17%) of the total sample said they owned branded merchandise. This was associated with a higher AUDIT-C score among current drinkers, suggesting greater frequency and higher volume.

Similarly, after taking account of factors known to influence young people's drinking, ownership of branded merchandise was also associated with future intention to try alcohol over the next year: those who owned it were almost twice as likely to be susceptible as those who didn't.

This is an observational study, and as such, can't establish cause. The sample is only likely to be partially representative of young adults above the legal age for buying alcohol, note the researchers, added to which, the marketing channels measured were not exhaustive.

Nevertheless, they conclude: "The results highlight that '360-degree' marketing strategies have created several avenues for young people to be exposed to, or involved with, alcohol marketing, and that is associated with consumption and higher-risk drinking in current drinkers and susceptibility in never drinkers."

They add: "Further scrutiny and examination of the UK's self-regulatory approach and viable alternatives are needed to identify feasible, appropriate and effective means of reducing marketing exposure in young people."