

Alcohol Ads On Social Media Encourage Drinking (But What's An Alcohol Ad On Social Media?)

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A new study^[2] has found that alcohol advertising on social media succeeds in encouraging people to drink. The study and the results are clear enough, but the biggest implication of the results is less than clear--on social media, what really constitutes alcohol advertising?

Researchers from Michigan State University^[3] exposed 121 participants to ads on Facebook^[4] FB +0.82%^[5]. One group viewed ads for a brand of beer, the other saw ads for a brand of bottled water. At the end of the study, the researchers offered everyone the choice between one of two gift cards (overtly as a gift for participating, covertly as the study's clincher)--one for a bar, the other for a coffee shop.

Of those who saw the beer ad, 73% chose the bar gift card. Of those who saw the water ad, 55% chose the bar card. That's nearly a 30% difference, and that's significant.

This is about as close to "causality" in an advertising-effects study as we're going to get. Granted, other factors could have influenced the results for some of the participants (maybe a couple people in the water group got a whiff of a craft beer that piqued their appetite) but as ad-influence research goes, this is a respectably straight line from exposure to result. Even accounting for the fact that alcohol is typically more expensive than coffee, which might make the bar card more desirable, the difference between the groups is noteworthy.

"What this tells us is there is an effect and it can be attributed to the sheer exposure to these messages," said Saleem Alhabash, assistant professor of advertising and public relations at MSU who led the study. In other words, "It primes them to think about alcohol."

Which brings me back to the question from the beginning of this article, because by definition social media is *all about exposure*. We are exposing each other to the variety show that is our social lives, and not infrequently that includes drinking. In a medium fueled by voyeuristically focusing on what others are doing, the power of our personal influence may very well exceed that of advertising.

On top of that, it's easy for advertisers to embed messages in the soup of social influence.

"On social media, the line that distinguishes an ad from regular content is very fine," adds Alhabash. "On TV, most can recognize an ad from a regular show. That's not always the case on social media."

In other words, social influence is diffuse on social media, and that makes identifying the specific influences of advertising hard to do. It also makes issues like influencing an underage audience more troubling, because even if you limit advertisers *direct* access to that audience, there are lots of indirect ways the under-21 crowd could still be influenced.

The study was published in the *Journal of Interactive Advertising*^[6].

You can find David DiSalvo on Twitter^[7], Facebook^[8], Google Plus^[9], and at his website daviddisalvo.org^[10].

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