

Young people, alcohol and the media

Findings
Informing change

September 2011

This study explored how entertainment media accessed by young people represented alcohol. It explored young people's interpretations of these messages and their potential influence on alcohol use. The way media professionals thought alcohol-related issues should be presented was also investigated.

Key points

- Alcohol and drinking commonly featured in the media used by young people, and were mostly presented as normal and unproblematic. Negative consequences were infrequently presented, but tended to focus on extreme effects.
- Images of alcohol differed by gender. Male-orientated media presented drinking as a way to shape masculine identity and form friendships. That targeted towards women focused on glamour and celebrity, while also suggesting that drinking was seen as less acceptable in women.
- Social networking sites (SNS) formed part of young people's drinking culture, documenting nights out but also informally 'marketing' alcohol products to their peers.
- Celebrity behaviour was unlikely to influence alcohol consumption directly. Rather than emulating celebrities depicted drinking to excess, young people tended to dislike them.
- Many young people had good insights into how the media represent alcohol. They rejected simplistic messages and understood that celebrity behaviour, including drinking, is largely constructed by editors and publicists to 'tell a story' and sell products. Parents' and friends' attitudes and behaviours were better predictors of young people's alcohol use.
- The authors conclude that the media can help to set 'healthy' norms for drinking behaviour. However, policies to restrict media representations of alcohol need to be part of wider strategies involving families, friends and media professionals. Promoting better understanding of how and why alcohol messages are presented may help to improve young people's health literacy and reduce alcohol-related problems.

The research

By Amanda Atkinson, Gill Elliott,
Mark Bellis and Harry Sumnall,
Centre for Public Health at Liverpool
John Moores University

Background

Young people are subject to a variety of media representations of alcohol which, along with other factors, may influence their drinking behaviour and attitudes to alcohol. Much research has examined the influence of alcohol marketing (e.g. advertising) on young people's drinking, but less has explored the influence and interpretation of more subtle representations of alcohol within entertainment media.

This study explored how alcohol is represented in television programmes, magazines and SNS used by young people, their interpretation of these images and messages, and the potential influence of the media on young consumers. It also sought insights from media professionals on the production and perceived influence of depictions of alcohol, and the potential role of the media in health promotion.

The portrayal of alcohol

Magazines' gender bias in depicting alcohol use

Representations of alcohol use in magazines differ according to the target sex. In women's magazines, drinking is often portrayed as glamorous and associated with celebrity. Yet at the same time alcohol consumption is often depicted as harmful to stereotypical feminine ideals such as beauty, good appearance and a woman's role as a mother. This is different to men's magazines, where female drinkers are most often portrayed as unfeminine (e.g. 'ladettes'), vulnerable and 'emotional', and likely to be sexually available. Men's drinking, however, particularly within the pub, is presented as a key aspect in forming masculine identity.

When young people were asked what they thought about these representations, young women criticised how magazines portrayed drinking by women in a negative light. They felt that this reflected unequal attitudes towards men's and women's drinking in general. Young men and women both thought that, in real life, men felt pressured to drink alcohol and that media portrayal of alcohol as a key element of masculine identity might add to this pressure. These gender-associated images may thus be an important factor in magazines' transmission of alcohol culture.

Normalisation of alcohol use on TV

The study's analysis showed that alcohol is the most prominent substance and beverage portrayed in TV programmes watched by young people. Alcohol is frequently depicted as a normal part of the characters' lives and social interactions. However, the effects and consequences of drinking were only shown in about 10 per cent of the drinking acts featured in the programmes analysed, and focused on either positive or extreme negative effects (e.g. laughing, alcohol dependence, violence).

Although young people understood that alcohol use was depicted in television programmes to reflect real life, they still thought that drinking was over-represented (particularly in soap operas), and that its effects were unrealistically depicted and exaggerated in order to create dramatic storylines. These views were reflected by media professionals, who believed that drinking was used as a practical plot device to facilitate character interaction and fill unscripted gaps, and as a way to exaggerate character traits for entertainment purposes. Overall, young people felt that television presented a selective image of alcohol use, that alcohol should be depicted less frequently, and that both the positive side of drinking (e.g. socialisation, fun) and the more common negative effects (e.g. hangovers, arguments) should be shown, without overemphasising the former or exaggerating the latter.

Alcohol use by celebrities

Celebrity alcohol use is a key feature of entertainment media accessed by young people, and is portrayed as an integral, glamorous aspect of celebrity events. Young people felt that the extent and nature of celebrity drinking were exaggerated in the media, with extensive coverage giving the impression that celebrities drink more than they actually do. Most young people thought that celebrities actually drink the same amount as the general public. They were critical of celebrities depicted drinking to intoxication, and they tended to dislike those celebrities. Young people regarded images of casual drinking by celebrities as unproblematic, which suggested that drinking must be seen to be excessive to be labelled problematic. Young people did not regard celebrity drinking in itself as appealing, but the associated glamour, lifestyle and wealth were attractive to some.

Online alcohol culture

SNS formed part of young people's drinking culture. Uploading alcohol-related images provided a way for them to document the events of a night out and portray a particular image of themselves (e.g. 'mad', 'cool', 'fun', 'hard'). Users of SNS indirectly market alcoholic drinks on behalf of the industry by creating unofficial 'advertisements' depicting product images, logos and links to brands' official websites. Social media are therefore providing young people with the opportunity to transmit social norms around alcohol to their peers. This is another means of marketing alcohol.

Influence of the media and celebrities on young people's alcohol use

Young people and media professionals felt that depictions of alcohol and the reporting of celebrity drinking might influence young people's attitudes and behaviour in two ways. Firstly, the repetition of alcohol-related content reinforces alcohol use as a cultural 'norm'. Secondly, negative reporting of alcohol use may deter young people from drinking. However, a 'third person effect' was evident, with young people deeming that younger individuals and 'others' were more susceptible to media influence than themselves. This suggests that young people discount negative messages about alcohol as not being relevant to, or about, them.

Statistical analysis of survey data showed that young people's exposure to media coverage of alcohol usage and their attachment to celebrities (and alcohol-drinking celebrities in particular) were not important risk factors for their own alcohol consumption. Instead, (often incorrect) estimates of their friends' drinking and the perceived acceptability of drinking by friends were found to be much better predictors.

The media's role in giving alcohol advice and information to young people

Neither young people nor media professionals believed that health-related messages about alcohol are newsworthy or of entertainment value. Providing realistic representations of drinking on television is difficult in an industry that primarily aims to entertain. News media can contribute to health promotion by publicising alcohol information campaigns or representing the views of public health professionals. But this would ordinarily have to be attached to a newsworthy story, which would usually present young people and their drinking in a negative light.

Youth-targeted output (e.g. magazines and soap operas) was viewed as having a responsibility to convey educational messages to audiences and raise awareness about health and social issues, such as alcohol use. However, the study showed that as young people tend to take in media output not specifically targeted at their age group, such messages are countered by depictions of alcohol in these other sources. Parents and the family were believed to be the main sources of information that young people would turn to if they required information on alcohol.

Conclusion

Compared with the influence of friends, young people's total media usage (excluding advertising, which was not assessed) and celebrity behaviour did not seem to have a direct influence on their drinking. Many young people had a good insight into how alcohol is represented in the media, and why it is represented in particular ways. Hence, in terms of prevention and education policy, inserting simplistic messages about alcohol harm and accurate images of celebrity intoxication into youth media is likely to be ineffective.

Young people are exposed to a large number of depictions of alcohol and drinking in adult and youth entertainment media, and SNS allow for informal 'marketing' of alcoholic products, often by young people themselves. Entertainment media present alcohol use as a normal part of everyday life. Where negative consequences of drinking are shown, these are often extreme, and thus young people may easily reject them as not being relevant to their lives. As a result of predominantly encountering extremes of drinking, young people may discount the potential consequences of their own drinking. Although their own drinking may appear relatively less harmful than media depictions, it may still have negative health and social impacts.

This research investigated how young people respond to these depictions of alcohol use. Legislation that restricts alcohol marketing, particularly advertising watersheds or bans, may reduce use and subsequent harms in young people, but would not address the normalisation of alcohol use portrayed in entertainment media. The challenge, therefore, is to infuse accurate depictions of alcohol use into these media where appropriate without compromising creativity and editorial independence. It must be acknowledged that many young people drink alcohol in small amounts without apparent negative consequences, but presenting such an accurate depiction may be difficult in light of guidelines from bodies such as Ofcom, for example, which do not support depictions of ‘unproblematic’ underage drinking as they may be seen to encourage alcohol use. Partnerships between media, industry and health professionals, or tying in entertainment with carefully considered, evidence-based health promotion interventions may be a productive way forward.

About the project

This mixed-method study carried out an in-depth analysis of how alcohol is represented in TV programmes, magazines and SNS used by young people aged 11–18. Through 15 focus group discussions with a total of 114 young people the study explored young people’s perspectives on the differing ways in which alcohol is represented in the media. A questionnaire survey of young people (941 responses) examined the relationships between a range of factors, including media use, attachment to celebrities and alcohol consumption. In addition, interviews with twelve professionals working within a range of media industries sought insights into the production of alcohol-related content, perceived influence of depictions of alcohol on young people, and the media’s potential role in health promotion regarding alcohol.

For further information

The full report, **Young people, alcohol and the media** by Amanda Atkinson, Gill Elliott, Mark Bellis and Harry Sumnall, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF’s research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

[Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

Other formats available.

Tel: 01904 615905 email: info@jrf.org.uk