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Title: The Urgent Need to Advance Alcohol Marketing Regulation to Protect Children

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The reduction or elimination of alcohol marketing strategies directed toward children and adolescents should be a major global health priority. It has been well documented in the literature that the alcohol industry's marketing practices drive the rise in alcohol consumption by minors (Sargent and Babor, 2020). Alcohol advertising exposure increases the likelihood of drinking initiation among adolescents. For those who have already begun to drink, there is an increase in consumption and more harmful use overall (Jernigan et al., 2017). It has been shown that earlier initiation and continued use of alcohol is associated with higher risks for both alcohol and drug addiction later on (Sargent and Babor, 2020). In addition, alcohol marketing also influences awareness along with attitudes and social norms which are important predictors to harmful alcohol consumption (Petticrew et al., 2017).

Despite the evidence, the alcohol industry's marketing activity remains largely unchecked and unregulated throughout the world (World Health Organization, 2018). Recently, Casswell and Rehm (2020) have publicly condemned the World Health Organization's (WHO) Executive Board for its inertia in putting forward alcohol control measures, despite clear indications that alcohol use and the harm associated with it are continuing to increase in several low- and middle-income countries. Additionally, the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission (Clark et al., 2020) also called upon all countries to regulate commercial campaigns from unhealthy products, including alcohol, that are directed toward, and considered to prey upon, children and adolescents. This effort was deemed to play a critical role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The predatory nature of these marketing tactics is evident. They are funded by large corporations that use aggressive, misleading, emotionally laden, and widespread campaigns to sell unhealthy products (Ames et al., 2019). As young people's exposure and initiation into alcohol use is associated with significant consequences to their health (Sargent and Babor, 2020), besides being illegal in many countries, all alcohol marketing targeting children and adolescents could be considered as predatory.

A prime example of the large-scale marketing campaigns that impact youth can be seen in the FIFA World Cup in Brazil during 2014. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), in the name of its sponsor AB InBev, succeeded in changing the country's law to allow the sale of alcoholic beverages in stadiums for this global event (Pinsky, 2014). The 2014 edition drew in a viewership of more than 3 billion people worldwide, millions of them who were 16-years-old or

younger (Kantar Media, 2015). The exposure that these young viewers had to alcohol marketing, including logos and television advertisements, throughout the tournament was substantial. Violations to the alcohol industry's marketing self-regulation codes pertaining to minors were also found in the event (Noel et al., 2017a), providing further evidence that self-regulation does not work to protect youth.

An additional central example is the Super Bowl which is understood as the largest sports event in the United States. It is a tradition in the US for people to host viewing parties in order to celebrate the occasion together. The advertisements play a major role in the event with ad space at its most expensive premium. In 2019, AB InBev spent US \$52 million which was the highest advertising expenditure in the Super Bowl at the time (Kantar Media, 2020). Millions of children and teenagers watched the game. One of the company's ads was for a "spiked seltzer" (flavored soda with alcohol, largely recognized as a gateway, or entrance drink for adolescents), which featured, mermaids and sharks (alluding to a popular tv show), with the aim of "pitching the product to the American public" by displaying "strong and powerful mystical feature" (Schultz, 2019). That kind of imagery would very much appeal to a younger audience (Lewis and Hill, 1998).

A more recent example of a strategy to keep up with the youth of today is the use of social media which is both interactive and ubiquitous. It is the language and mode of communication that is most likely to target and reach a younger population (Lobstein et al., 2017; Yang and Zhao, 2018; De Veirman et al., 2019). Due to the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, there was an exponential growth in the use of e-commerce platforms selling alcoholic beverages. Ze Delivery, an e-commerce developed by AB InBev Brazilian subsidiary, AMBEV, reached more than 1.5 million at-home deliveries within March and April 2020 (Bouças, 2020) and accelerated its interactions with the public through social media postings. In marketing campaigns advertised on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, consumers are enticed to compete for incentives such as chairs and tables to set up an in-home bar, with a beer logo highlighted on all the products, potentially exposing minors who live in those houses. Alcohol-branded merchandise is a powerful form of marketing as it lingers in the home for a long period of time, and has been shown to be associated with drinking among adolescents (Critchlow, 2019; Jones, 2016).

Accepted Article

There is evidence that restrictions on alcohol marketing are likely to be beneficial at reducing alcohol use (Siegfried & Parry, 2019), especially when aimed at adolescents (Finan et al, 2020). However, despite the recommendations of the WHO Global Strategy to Reduce Harmful Use of Alcohol, countries are making no significant progress in regulating alcohol marketing (Jernigan and Ross, 2020) and self-regulation is proven to be a non-effective measure to prevent youth exposure to it (Noel et al., 2017b). It has become imperative that solid measures are put in place to monitor and control these practices, including social media marketing strategies, in order to protect the health of children and adolescents. Without the adequate regulation in place and the government's enforcement of public health protections, alcohol marketing tactics will continue to target and negatively impact vulnerable groups such as children and adolescents in low and high-income populations.

Declaration of Interests

We declare no competing interests.

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