

Not in front of the children

The government's updated alcohol strategy, *Safe, Sensible, Social* aims to reduce the number of under-18s who drink and the amount they drink. But Alcohol Concern found that many children are being openly influenced by alcohol advertising during their favourite programmes, as **Don Shenker** explains.

Alcohol Concern decided to investigate the extent to which children were being exposed to alcohol advertising, by looking at the scheduling of alcohol adverts. In particular, we wanted to see the extent to which they appear on television before and after the 9pm watershed and whether any of them are placed within programmes aimed at children. We were also keen to look at whether the current rules on the scheduling of adverts are adequate.

Our investigation focused on two separate weeks of broadcasting, looking at when alcohol adverts appeared and within which TV programmes. A small sample of individual programmes were then analysed for demographic breakdowns to see the percentage of children viewing at the time. We found that most alcohol adverts actually appear before the 9pm watershed and in programmes where large numbers of children are viewers.

Previous studies have shown that young people are increasingly adept at interpreting the cultural messages contained in alcohol advertisements. Research on alcohol advertising among 10- to 17-year-olds, conducted by Strathclyde University in 1988, indicated that 88 per cent of 10- to 13-year-olds and 96 per cent of 14- to 17-year-olds were aware of alcohol advertising and 76 per cent of these could identify three or more advertisements when the brand name was masked.

Four years later, it was shown that young people, even 10- to 12-year-olds were adept at interpreting the messages, images and targeting of alcohol advertisements, in the same

way as adults. The authors concluded: 'In essence, the more aware, familiar and appreciative young people are of alcohol the more likely they are to drink both now and in the future.'

The World Health Organisation's European Charter on Alcohol states that: 'All children and adolescents have the right to grow up in an environment protected from the negative consequences of alcohol consumption and, to the extent possible, from the promotion of alcoholic beverages. A long-term national study in the US, published in January 2006, concluded that for each additional dollar per capita spent on alcohol advertising in a local market, young people drank 3 per cent more.

Research on young people's alcohol consumption rates carried out last year showed a marginal decrease in the numbers of young people who had consumed alcohol in the past week. However children who do consume alcohol are now drinking more units than previously. Alcohol Concern's *Glass Half Empty* report showed 11- to 13-year-old boys drinking 43 per cent more units in 2006 than they did in 2000, and 11- to 13-year-old girls drinking 82 per cent more units.

Looking at the broadcasting and regulatory framework for advertising highlights areas of inconsistency and confusion. Ofcom's own research carried out in 2004 around alcohol advertising and its impact on children declared much television alcohol advertising (of alcopops in particular) to be 'closely aligned to youth culture and of strong interest to underage drinkers'.

The Advertising Standards Authority scheduling and the Committee of Advertising Practice (Broadcasting) rules dictate that no alcohol adverts should be shown during programmes 'particularly likely to appeal' to audiences below the age of 18. A programme is considered to be of particular appeal to children if the proportion of children watching is 20 per cent greater than the proportion of children in society – a very high threshold.

The Committee of Advertising Practice rules for non-broadcast advertising state that 'no medium should be used to advertise alcoholic drinks if more than 25 per cent of its audience is under 18 years of age' – a much lower threshold.

It is unclear why non-broadcast rules are different to broadcasting ones. But this means that an alcoholic drinks advert scheduled on television has fewer restrictions in relation to protecting children than if the same advert was placed in a tube or railway station.

Alcohol Concern carried out unique research into alcohol adverts in two separate weeks (11 to 17 December 2006 and 19 to 25 March 2007) to see how many alcohol adverts featured before the 9pm watershed, and which TV programmes these were placed during. We also looked at the age breakdown of a small sample of programmes potentially aimed at, or attractive to, children.

We looked at the distribution of alcohol adverts before and after the 9pm watershed in a seven-day period in December 2006. Our study showed the majority of alcohol adverts were shown before the 9pm watershed. There

Advertiser	Alcohol Product	Channel	Time and Date	Programme	Total (number of 4-19 yr-olds watching)
William Morrison's (supermarket)	Special Offer: Grolsch 2-pack	Five	6.13pm 11 December 2006	Home and Away	6,000 (regional figure for just ITV West viewers)
Lidl (supermarket)	Fine Wines & 'Low Prices 3'	ITV	7.46pm 15 December 2006	Coronation Street	237,300
William Morrison's (supermarket)	Special Offer: Grolsch 2-pack	ITV	1.53pm 17 December 2006	The X Factor – The Final	1,126,000

were also twice as many supermarket alcohol adverts shown before the watershed than after.

There was also a rising number of alcohol adverts shown from 3pm to 5pm, coinciding with the time when most children return from school. It would be a reasonable assumption that most people in employment will not have returned home until after 5pm, so the marked spike in alcohol advertising between 3pm and 5pm is, at the very least, puzzling.

Alcohol adverts were shown during a number of programmes where a significant share of the audience included children, including *Home and Away* and *The X-Factor*.

In some popular soap programmes such as *Coronation Street*, there are likely to be more than one million children watching the programme. Although the programme may not be judged as likely to appeal to children, the large numbers of children viewing is of great concern. At the time of our study, 11 per cent of the audience was shown to be between four and 19 years old – representing 1,126,000 young people.

Supermarket advertising appears to particularly aim to reach early evening audiences, with double the amount of supermarket alcohol adverts appearing before 9pm.

Similarly, *The X Factor* and *Home and Away* are clearly programmes viewed by children and likely to appeal to a young audience. The 20 per cent rule, which says that programmes are deemed to be unsuitable for carrying alcohol advertising if the proportion of children watching is 20 per cent greater than the proportion of children in society, is not only unnecessarily

complicated, it also means that hundreds of thousands of children are regularly being exposed to alcohol advertising in this country.

The Advertising Standards Authority is responsible for dealing with public complaints about advertising but the system used for assessing whether a programme is suitable for alcohol advertising is complex and not well publicised, and this makes it difficult for the public to complain.

It is not clear why the Committee for Advertising Practice's non-broadcasting regulations, stating that alcohol adverts should not be shown where under-18s make up more than 25 per cent of the audience, are different from the broadcasting regulations concerned with programmes 'likely to appeal to under 18s'. It could be argued that all of the programmes analysed by Alcohol Concern are likely to appeal to under-18s.

In spite of various codes and regulations, alcohol adverts are appearing in programmes that appeal to large numbers of children and where the total number of under 18-year-olds watching is significant.

In light of our findings, Alcohol Concern has made the following recommendations:

- There should be no alcohol advertising (either branded or supermarket) from 6am through to 9pm regardless of the predicted age of audience of a programme. In other words, there should be no alcohol advertising before the watershed. In our view this is the only sure way to protect the majority of children

from alcohol advertising.

- In programmes which run after the watershed but are still likely to appeal to some children, such as sporting events, alcohol adverts should not appear where more than 10 per cent (one in ten) of the audience are, or are likely to be, children.
- The regulations covering alcohol adverts should state clearly who is responsible for monitoring scheduling and what sanctions exist when these are contravened. This information should be publicly promoted.
- Inconsistencies between the CAP non-broadcast and broadcast codes should be resolved, with a clear definition of programming likely to appear to children identified and promoted.

Our research highlights how easy it is for drinks advertisers to show alcohol adverts during the times that children are more likely to be at home, watching TV, and during programmes that appeal to them. We need to explore how we can do more to protect children from alcohol harms and promote a safer, more responsible culture in relation to young people and alcohol.

This subject will be explored at Alcohol Concern's conference 'Too Much Too Young' on 7 November in London. See www.alcoholconcern.org.uk for more information on the conference and AC's report.

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