Medicine and the Media

Un-health promotion: results of a survey of alcohol promotion on television

ROGER BARTON, SALLY GODFREY

Abstract

To estimate how widely and to whom alcoholic drinks are promoted 1258 television advertisements were studied over a 10 week period that included the Christmas and New Year holidays in 1986-7. A total of 156 advertisements (12%) promoted alcohol, and this percentage increased significantly over the holiday period to 17%. These advertisements were longer than those advertising other products, and just over half (56%) occupied the first position in commercial breaks. During sports programmes and between the hours of 1800 and 1900 there was an increase in the number of advertisements for alcohol, but there was no difference before and after 2100.

It was found that the extent and influence of the promotion of alcohol were great and that such advertising is seen by many children and adolescents.

Introduction

The excessive use of alcohol and subsequent harm caused are widely acknowledged.^{1,2} The doctor's role is mainly to provide treatment after the physical or mental damage is done. The more vital aim—the only real long term aim—is health education. The health education budget is pitifully small compared with the advertising budget of the drinks industry. (The Health Education Council budget in 1984-5 was £217 553 compared with the industry's £150m.³) Less is known about the extent of alcohol promotion and to whom it is promoted in relation to both the advertising of other commodities and services and to the most "vulnerable" groups in society, young children and adolescents. We decided to study these relationships during the Christmas season and in two periods before and after Christmas 1986.

Methods

We chose television advertising. The aims of the study were to determine (i) the extent of alcohol promotion, (ii) the volume of such advertising during

specific hours of viewing, (iii) whether the advertising was "targeted" towards any particular type or age of audience as determined by the type and time of the programme, (iv) any change in the pattern of advertising over the Christmas period, and (v) to note any health promotion advertisements concerning alcohol.

Random television programmes were studied on both commercial channels (ITV or Channel 4) for a 10 week period in the Scottish and Granada broadcasting regions in 1986 and January 1987. To determine if any change with time occurred during the study the study was subdivided into three periods. The first three weeks and the last three weeks were two control periods either side of Christmas, and the "Christmas period" was defined as 1-31 December.

All advertising during the study period was recorded on to a standardised form, and the following features were noted: television channel, date, time, type of programme, and type of advertisement (promoting alcohol, health promotion with respect to alcohol, or other). On one day each week the duration of each advertisement and the nature of the first advertisement in each commercial break were also recorded. The sampling day moved forward each week, and only the first seven weeks were studied.

To determine the usual distribution of types of television programmes viewing guides were studied for one week from each of the three periods. Programmes were classified broadly according to type—documentary, feature film, comedy, natural history, etc.—and the proportional duration of screen times determined. Advertisements were assigned to programmes if they came either within the programme or at the end of it. Commercial breaks at the beginning of a programme were not assigned to that programme.

Details of the age of the audiences were obtained from the research department of the Independent Broadcasting Authority and from the viewing policies from the IBA Code of Advertising Standards and Practice.⁴

Statistical analysis was carried out with Student's *t* test and the χ^2 test using fourfold or contingency table analysis. Yates's correction was not used in the fourfold tests as the numbers were large; 95% confidence intervals are given where possible.

Results

A total of 1258 advertisements were seen during 247 commercial breaks and 104 hours of television viewing time (50 hours on ITV and 54 hours on Channel 4). Ninety six programmes were sampled in 52 days out of a possible 70 days in the study period. A total of 156 advertisements (12.4%) promoted alcohol. The proportion increased significantly from a mean of 8.9% for the control period to a mean of 16.8% for the Christmas period, a difference of 7.9% (95% confidence interval 4.1 to 11.6; $\chi^2=26.2$; 2 df; $p<0.0005$) (table).

Percentage of advertisements promoting alcohol in the three periods of the study

Type of advertisement	Before Christmas % (No)	During Christmas % (No)	After Christmas % (No)	Total % (No)
Promoting alcohol	12.6 (43)	16.8 (93)	5.8 (20)	12.4 (156)
Other	87.4 (298)	83.2 (459)	94.2 (345)	87.6 (1102)
Total	100 (341)	100 (552)	100 (365)	100 (1258)

University of Edinburgh Gastrointestinal Unit, Western General Hospital, Edinburgh EH4 2XU

ROGER BARTON, MB, MRCP, lecturer in medicine

The Health Centre, Bonnyrigg, Midlothian

SALLY GODFREY, SRN, SCM, health visitor

Correspondence to: Dr Barton.

FIG 1—The advertisements promoting alcohol shown as a percentage of all advertisements seen each week over the 10 weeks of the study. Numbers are also given.

Figure 1 shows that if narrower limits had been set for the Christmas period this increase would have been even more striking: in the third quarter of December (15th-23rd) 22.6% of all advertisements promoted alcohol.

No antialcohol advertisements were recorded during the study, but eight advertisements promoting alcohol free lager were noted (4.9% of all advertisements for alcohol and alcohol related drinks (164)).

There was an increase in the promotion of alcohol during sports programmes: 37 (15.7%) advertisements *v* 119 (11.6%) for other programmes, a difference of 4.1% (95% CI 0.94% to 9.1%; $\chi^2=2.97$; 1 df; not significant at the 5% level using the *t* test; $p<0.1$, >0.05). There was no difference in the proportion of advertisements before and after 2100 hours ($\chi^2=0.3$; 1 df; $p>0.5$; not significant). Figure 2 shows a definite increase in the promotion of alcohol between 1800 and 1900 hours ($\chi^2=17.01$; 9 df; $p<0.05$). The high proportion of children in the audiences at these times (data on file, IBA research unit) is the rationale for the "9 pm" rule in the IBA code of practice.⁴

FIG 2—The numbers of advertisements recorded for each hour of the day. The increase in the number of advertisements promoting alcohol between the hours of 1800 and 1900 is notable.

In 247 commercial breaks there was an average of 5.093 advertisements per break. The proportion of advertisements for alcohol that led in each break was highly significant: 35.2% ($\chi^2=21.2$; 1 df; $p<0.001$; data not shown). Looking at it from a different perspective over half of the advertisements for alcohol (55.8%) led in a commercial break compared with only 14.5% of other advertisements (difference 41.3%, 95% CI 35.05 to 47.55). Advertisements for alcohol were also longer than other advertisements (mean and standard error 28.1 (6.57) *v* 19.5 (8.79) seconds; mean difference 8.6 seconds, 95% CI 2.95 to 14.25, $t=3.01$, 32 df, $p<0.01$, data not shown).

The proportions of types of programme viewed in the study were similar to the usual distribution of programmes that are screened as determined by

the viewing guides (*TV Times*), ruling out bias owing to selective viewing (data not shown).

Discussion

The results of this study show how large the advertising budget of the alcohol industry is and to whom it is directed. In a country where anything from a toothbrush to a house is advertised for sale on television it is hard to imagine that alcohol represents 12.4% of all such salable items. This proportion is further increased if indirect promotion is included, as in advertisements for off licences and supermarkets, which sell alcoholic drinks.

Perhaps predictably the advertising of alcohol increases over the Christmas holiday period and at the same time overshadows any concurrent campaign directed at health or road safety. During the study no such campaigns were noted on television, although several have been conducted in the past.

The relative "power" of the advertisements for alcohol is notable. Not only were these advertisements longer than the others, but they also occupied the first position in the commercial breaks to an overwhelming extent. It has been shown that advertisements in this lead in position are more effective.⁵ In subjective assessment the highly professional, persuasive, glamorous content of alcohol advertisements, with catchy music and sexual overtones, was also noted.

Most worrying is the even distribution of advertising for alcohol before and after 2100 hours, the more extensive advertising in the early evening from 1800 to 1900 hours, and the probable targeting at sports programmes. But does advertising reach children? Recent research has shown that in households with television 43% of children have their own television set.⁶ More important, children frequently watch television after 9 pm, are attentive to advertisements, and nearly one in 10 identified a beer advert among their two favourite advertisements.⁷ These observations show a failure to direct advertising away from vulnerable and impressionable children and adolescents, contrary to the code of practice⁴ and suggest a deliberate effort to influence young people preferentially.

We did not study other forms of advertising such as that found on hoardings, in the cinema, and in magazines, but the findings of preliminary studies show that the same pattern is repeated—the advertisements for alcohol are longer (cinema) and more prevalent than other advertisements. But health promotion advertisements concerning alcohol were noted both in the cinema and on hoardings but were not seen on television (R Barton, unpublished data).

Television advertising of alcohol is inordinately prevalent. It was greater at a time when sense and caution are usually urged, and it reaches young children and adolescents as much as it does adults. We are only now seeing a long awaited and welcome decrease in tobacco use after advertising of tobacco was strongly curtailed, and it is believed that curtailment has led to this to a certain extent (at least in many sections of the community). Is it not time that the promotion of alcohol receives the same treatment?

Sadly, the large financial disincentive of £6257m in revenue which the government realises from excise duty and value added tax (1985-6 figures)⁸ and the independent Health Education Council being replaced with a new body that is directly responsible to the government^{8,9} makes this seem even less likely than before.

References

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