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M Dottington Fullwood
Columbia University

Jennifer Mongiovi
Columbia University

Grace Hillyer
Columbia University

Corey H. Basch
William Paterson University

Danna Ethan
CUNY Lehman College

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

M Dottington Fullwood, Jennifer Mongiovi, Grace Hillyer, Corey H. Basch, Danna Ethan, and Rodney Hammond

Short Communication

An advertisement analysis of alcohol products in popular women's magazines

M Dottington Fullwood^{1*}, Jennifer Mongiovi², Grace Hillyer², Corey H. Basch³, Danna Ethan⁴ and Rodney Hammond^{3,5}

¹Department of Health and Behavior Studies, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, USA

²Department of Epidemiology, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, USA

³Department of Public Health, William Paterson University, NJ, USA

⁴Department of Health Sciences, Lehman College, The City University of New York, New York, USA

⁵Department of Health and Nutrition Sciences, Montclair State University, 1 Normal Ave, Montclair, NJ, USA

Introduction

In the United States, the use of alcohol is largely a social activity and the patterns and trends of consumption vary by gender, and cultural and ethnic group [1,2]. Recent national survey data demonstrate that, among women between the ages of 18 and 44 years, 53.6% had consumed any alcohol in the past 30 days and use was highest among 21-24 year old, non-Hispanic white women with a college degree. The misuse of alcohol, for example, heavy drinking defined as >14 drinks per week for males and >7 for women or binge drinking in which 5 drinks for men and 4 drinks for women are consumed in 2 hours or less [3], has important health ramifications. Alcohol misuse is related to over 200 diseases including liver cirrhosis and cancer and, if used during pregnancy, can lead to fetal alcohol spectrum disorders [4]. Misuse of alcohol is also a major contributor to injury-related health conditions, motor vehicle crashes, and violence [5]. The economic burden of excessive alcohol use, reported at \$223.5 billion in 2006, is a direct result of premature death, disability, lost workplace productivity, and healthcare expenses, making alcohol consumption a critically important public health issue [6].

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulates alcohol advertising to ensure that what is presented to the public is truthful and non-deceptive. The FTC additionally encourages the alcohol industry to self-regulate with regard to the placement and content of alcohol advertisements, particularly when advertisements may be viewed by teenagers [7]. Over the years, the intended audiences of alcohol advertising campaigns have changed with drinks such as beer and whiskey marketed primarily to men and other fruitier, feminine, "easy to drink" sweet alcohol products to women [8]. It has been argued that gender stereotyping in alcohol advertising exploits sexism in our society and attempts to link products with attractiveness to the opposite gender [8].

The current study evaluated the number and content of alcohol product (hard liquor and beer) advertisements in popular U.S. interest or lifestyle magazines for women. Themes of the advertisements were characterized and differences in alcohol product advertisement placement in magazines targeting non-Hispanic white and Black and Latina audiences were evaluated.

Materials and methods

We conducted a descriptive analysis of alcohol advertisements

in 14 popular U.S. magazines marketed to women in the U.S. These magazines included *Allure*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Cosmopolitan for Latinas*, *Ebony*, *Elle*, *Essence*, *Girl's Life*, *Glamour*, *Jet*, *Latina*, *Marie Claire*, *Seventeen*, *Teen Vogue*, *Vogue*. A total of 98 issues published between January and August, 2014 were reviewed. The combined readership of these magazines is nearly 80 million female readers with a mean readership age of 37.5 years and a median household income of \$62,087 [9-21]. Of the magazines reviewed, five were specifically marketed to a Black or Latina audience: *Cosmopolitan for Latinas*, *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Jet*, *Latina*.

Paid advertisements for alcohol products (hard liquor and beer) throughout the issue as well as those on the back cover were evaluated. Advertisements highlighted as "editor's picks" or featured in editorials or articles were excluded from this analysis. Characteristics of the magazine readership were assessed and included the median age and household income of the readership. For each advertisement we assessed whether a warning related to the use of alcohol was present and if healthy-appearing models were used in the advertisement. Advertisements were categorized by the following themes: 1) partying 2) having fun with friends 3) being cool 4) enjoyment, 5) happiness, and 6) having a free spirit. The theme of "partying" was defined as a scene involving alcohol and a large group of individuals at a special event, whereas "fun with friends" portrayed a more intimate group of fewer individuals in a casual atmosphere. "Being cool" was depicted by an image conveying a sense of status by the product's consumer in the advertisement. "Enjoyment" focused on the pleasure of drinking the product as opposed to the implication of happiness conveyed in a scene in which drinking was not necessarily shown, but alcohol was present and models exhibited a positive mental state. Finally, "having a free spirit" was defined as an advertisement depicting a non-conformist type of individual.

Descriptive analyses included mean readership ≤ 38 years age of dichotomized age vs. as > 38 years $\leq \$$ and $62,087$ median vs. $>$ household. $\$62,087$ income Frequency distributions for advertisement characteristics (warnings present, models depicted in the advertisement

Correspondence to: M. Dottington Fullwood, MS, 125 W 120th St. Box 114, New York, NY 10027, Tel: (212)-678-6607; **E-mail:** Fullwood@tc.columbia.edu

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and advertisement themes). All analyses were performed using IBM SPSS (version 22). The Institutional Review Boards at Teachers College, William Paterson University, Columbia University, Montclair State University, and Lehman College do not review studies that do not involve human subjects.

Results

Overall, there were 16 advertisements in the 98 issues of the 14 magazines reviewed. The alcohol advertisements were distributed equitably in magazines by the median age and household annual income of the readership (Table 1). Warnings were displayed in only 62.5% of advertisements and models with the products were seen in 37.5%. "Being cool" was the dominant theme of the advertisements. Of the 16 advertisements, 14 (87.5%) were found in magazines for the non-Hispanic White audience and 2 (12.5%) in magazines for the Black and Latina markets. Compared to the alcohol advertisements in the magazines for Black and Latina women, the advertisements for the non-Hispanic White market were more often displayed in magazines for the ≤ 38 younger vs. > 38 (years) and more affluent households ($> \$62,000$ vs. $\leq \$62,000$). Fewer advertisements in the non-Hispanic White magazines showed warnings (57.1%). The dominant themes in the non-Hispanic White magazine alcohol advertisements were having fun with friends and being cool as opposed to partying and happiness in the 2 advertisements in magazines marketed to Black and Latina women.

Discussion

The findings of this study are interesting for several reasons. First, it was determined that hard liquor advertisements were found more frequently than any other type of alcohol beverages. While the annual

Table 1. Characteristics of magazine readership and advertisements by alcohol product type (n=16).

	Total alcohol* advertisement n=16	Audience	
		Non-Hispanic White N = 14 (87.5%)	Black/Latina* N = 2 (12.5%)
Readership characteristics			
Median age (years)			
≤ 38	9 (56.3)	9 (100.0)	0 (0.0)
> 38	7 (43.7)	5 (71.4)	2 (28.6)
Median household income			
$\leq \$62,000$	8 (50.0)	6 (42.9)	2 (100.0)
$> \$62,000$	8 (50.0)	8 (57.1)	0 (0.0)
Advertisement characteristics			
Warnings present advertisement	10 (62.5)	8 (57.1)	2 (100.0)
Themes in advertisement ^c			
Partying	4 (25.0)	3 (21.4)	1 (50.0)
Fun with friends	9 (56.3)	9 (64.3)	0 (0.0)
Being "cool"	11 (68.8)	11 (78.6)	0 (0.0)
Enjoyment	2 (12.5)	2 (14.3)	0 (0.0)
Happiness	4 (25.0)	3 (21.4)	1 (50.0)
Free spirit	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Healthy models in advertisement	6 (37.5)	5 (35.7)	1 (50.0)

revenue is in the billions per year for both beer and hard liquor, it was hard liquor that was more likely to appear in advertisements [22,23].

Second, the majority of alcohol advertisements were found in magazines marketed toward non-Hispanic White audiences. While the health consequences of developing alcohol-related liver disease are greater and there are higher rates of binge drinking in Hispanics and Blacks as compared to Whites [24], advertisements for alcohol were not more prevalent in magazines geared toward these audiences. Nevertheless, health warnings in advertisements could help curb the potential life lost and unintentional injuries.

Conclusion

The adverse consequences associated with alcohol over-consumption can result in a disruption between friends, family, and social support [25]. Overall, the findings of this study indicate that alcohol advertisements were not abundant in the magazines included in this sample. Although not found in this study, research suggests that minority communities are more likely to be the target of alcohol advertisements [26]. Information and tactics like customized social marketing strategies are needed to counterbalance distinct advertising techniques that entice women, and Black and Latina women in particular are needed.

This study is limited by the cross-sectional design and the small sample size. However, it contributes to the literature on this subject by including a wide range of magazines including both those marketed to a Black and/or Latina audience. Future research can benefit from inclusion of additional magazines, over a greater period of time, with analysis of additional themes. Additional studies can also focus on the extent to which alcohol advertisements activate a response to initiate alcohol consumption.

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