

CORRESPONDENCE

What Can We Learn From Alcohol-Related YouTube Videos?

Dear Editor:

The article by Primack and colleagues (2017) presents an interesting content analysis of the portrayal of alcohol brands on YouTube. Almost half of the videos considered contained humor and only 2%-4% portrayed aggression, addiction, or injuries. The authors highlighted that even with some existing social responsibility codes—provided by alcohol industry self-regulated councils—suggesting that alcohol advertising should not depict excessive or irresponsible drinking, the alcohol industry does not always comply with these orientations. In addition, it worth noting that most of the retrieved videos were not uploaded by the companies themselves (Primack et al., 2017), corroborating other recent study results suggesting that video promotions occur even without prior alcohol industry knowledge (Lobstein et al., 2017).

Google adopts an advertising policy for alcohol on all its platforms, including YouTube. According to these, the advertising of alcoholic products must comply with local alcohol laws and industry standards. In cases of declared advertising produced by the alcohol industry, this is easier to regulate. However, this may be difficult when addressing videos submitted by ordinary people.

There are a plethora of alcohol related videos on YouTube uploaded by ordinary users that are not directly related to a specific alcohol brand and that depict intoxication (Primack et al., 2015). For example, a famous Brazilian YouTube channel, with almost 14 million subscribers, has at least eight videos that are part of a competition called *the cirrhosis cup*. The videos consist of video games, usually soccer games, played between digital influencers (YouTubers) in which the scorer of a goal must drink a shot of distilled alcohol beverage, while the person who conceded the goal must drink two shots. One video alone had over 11 million views, with all the videos being watched a total of more than 50 million times. In all cases, the videos are labeled as comedy videos, but they also portray scenes of intoxication and vomiting. The label of these videos may seem paradoxical. However, some acknowledged negative alcohol-related consequences are perceived as positive by some young adult drinkers (Mallett et al., 2013).

Digital media, including YouTube, is likely to be having an impact on drinking behavior (Lobstein et al., 2017) and drinking normalization (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010) because it has become part of the contemporary formal and informal educational process (Burke & Snyder, 2008; Jaffar, 2012; Saurabh & Sairam, 2013). It is therefore crucial to take into account the effect that alcohol-related videos on YouTube and other digital channels may have on perceptions about alcohol because most use humor to depict positive associations, with only a few presenting the negative consequences (Primack et al., 2017). Most of these videos target young people, who misperceive drinking norms (Perkins et al., 2005), and the videos portraying binge drinking or intoxication may reinforce the misperception that these alcohol use patterns are normal behavior for young people.

YouTube alcohol advertisements and nonpromotional alcohol-related videos are reaching large audiences and engaging millions of users, while e-health strategies are suffering from high attrition rates (Eysenbach, 2005) and, therefore, have limited effect (Radtke et al., 2017). This poses a major question about how to effectively engage participants in e-health strategies that can counterbalance YouTube and similar videos. Thus, it is crucial for researchers and policymakers to learn about the features of YouTube related to engagement with the platform. This may help e-health strategies to deal with attrition by becoming more attractive and more inviting and may help encourage critical thinking on alcohol social norms as well as act as a counterpoint to the current alcohol-related content on YouTube.

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