

Bloomberg School of Public Health

Department of Health, Behavior and Society
624 N. Broadway, Room 280
Baltimore, MD 21205-1996
(410) 502-4076 / Fax 410-502-4080

DAVID JERNIGAN COMMENTS ON DIGITAL ALCOHOL MARKETING REPORT

I am David Jernigan, the director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. There are now at least 13 peer-reviewed, longitudinal studies of the relationship between exposure to alcohol marketing and youth drinking behavior. These studies have all found that the more youth are exposed to alcohol marketing, in a wide range of forms and formats, the more likely they are to drink.

With close to 5,000 young people under 21 dying as a result of alcohol use every year, there is a strong public health interest in preventing and reducing underage drinking. Our studies at the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth have consistently found that young people are being exposed to more alcohol advertising per capita than adults 21 and over, in magazines and on television and radio. We have found that the industry's efforts at "self-regulation" have done little to reduce this overexposure of young people. When we looked at internet marketing back in 2003, we found close to 700,000 in-depth visits – that is, visits that got beyond the industry's so-called age verification screens – to 55 alcohol company web sites over a six month period.

This important new study from the Center for Digital Democracy and Berkeley Media Studies Group shines a bright light on what the alcohol companies are now doing in the largely unmeasured world of the internet and digital marketing. As was the case with tobacco marketing, the study finds no smoking guns to prove that the alcohol companies are targeting our children – these only showed up when tobacco companies were forced to release their internal marketing documents.

What the study does show is that alcohol companies are using sophisticated neuromarketing and other techniques to foster engagement with and loyalty to their brands. It finds them everywhere – in on-line video, social networking sites, virtual worlds and mobile networks – places where young people spend increasing amounts of their time, far from the understanding or supervision of their parents. It also shows that they continue to ignore calls by state attorneys general and others to strengthen their laughable "age verification" mechanisms.

In 2007, alcohol companies had more than 300 conversations with our young people about how great it is to drink on television alone. In its advertising as in the digital realm, the alcohol companies' virtual worlds show all of the appeal and none of consequences of alcohol use. They undercut the efforts of parents, teachers and policy makers to reduce youth access to alcohol. The study's authors are calling on the Federal Trade Commission and state attorneys general to step up their efforts to monitor and police the alcohol companies' activities in the digital world. At this point, alcohol companies appear limited only by their imaginations and their pocketbooks. We can do more to protect our children from exposure to appeals to use the product that is their number one drug of abuse. We need the industry required to be transparent about their activities in digital media. We need more effective age verification, and technologies are available for this. And we need greater responsibility and restraint from the alcohol companies themselves. Parents as well as our children deserve better than the industry's ineffective efforts at self-regulation.

