

# Money spent on beer ads linked to underage drinking

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Douglas Gentile. Credit: Iowa State University

Advertising budgets and strategies used by beer companies appear to influence underage drinking, according to new research from Iowa State University.

The findings show that the amount of money spent on advertising strongly predicted the percentage of teens who had heard of, preferred and tried different beer brands. For example, 99% of [middle school](#) and high school students surveyed for the study had heard of Budweiser and Bud Light—the top spender on advertising—and 44% said they had used the brand.

The study, published by the journal *Addictive Behaviors Reports*, is one of the first to examine the relationship among advertising budgets, underage [drinking](#) and brand awareness. The study was led by Iowa State professor Douglas Gentile, assistant professors Brooke Arterberry and Kristi Costabile, and Aalborg University assistant professor Patrick Bender.

Gentile says advertisers use cognitive and

affective strategies—humor, animation, funny voices, special effects—that often appeal to youth. To test this, researchers looked at money spent on beer ads to determine the relationship with brand awareness, preference, loyalty and use among teens. They then compared advertising strategies with teens' intention to drink as an adult and current alcohol consumption.

Of the 1,588 middle and [high school students](#) surveyed, more than half (55%) had at least one [alcoholic drink](#) in the past year, 31% had one or more drinks at least once a month and 43% engaged in heavy drinking. When asked to name their two favorite TV commercials, alcohol-related ads had the highest recall (32%) followed by soft drinks (31%), fashion (19%), automotive (14%) and sports (9%). A quarter of those surveyed said they owned alcohol-related products.

"We can't say from this one study that advertisers are specifically targeting youth, but they are hitting them," Gentile said. "If you look at beer ads, advertisers are using all the tricks we know work at grabbing children's attention."

Research has shown teens are heavy consumers of media and therefore exposed to more advertising. Costabile, who studies entertainment narratives, says advertisers—beer companies or any brand—know that the message is more persuasive when delivered as a story.

"Viewers or readers aren't thinking about the message through a critical lens," Costabile said. "Instead, audiences become immersed in a compelling story and identify with the characters, a process which leads them to unintentionally be persuaded by the messages of the story."

## Return on investment

According to the Federal Trade Commission, 14 alcohol companies spent \$3.45 billion on marketing

in 2011. Of that amount, 26% was spent on advertising. Spending has grown since 1999, when Iowa State researchers collected the [survey data](#). At that time, the top five advertised brands (Budweiser/Bud Light, Miller Genuine Draft/Miller Lite, Coors/Coors Light, Corona/Corona Extra and Heineken) spent just over \$1 billion.

"Not much has changed since we collected the data, other than amount spent on [advertising](#)," Gentile said. "Underage drinking is still a problem, beer companies still advertise and the psychological mechanisms of how ads work and the way teens learn are all the same."

ISU researchers also asked teens about their intentions to drink as an adult. Advertising and parent and peer approval of drinking were all significant predictors of intention to drink. Arterberry, who studies issues related to substance use, says with a growing number of young adults reporting [substance use](#) disorders this study offers insight as to why some may start drinking at a young age.

"By understanding what influences behavior we can design more effective prevention and intervention programs to reduce [underage drinking](#), which in turn could lessen the likelihood that [alcohol use](#) becomes a problem," Arterberry said.

**More information:** Douglas A. Gentile et al, Beer advertisements and adolescent drinking knowledge, expectancies, and behavior, *Addictive Behaviors Reports* (2019). DOI: [10.1016/j.abrep.2019.100226](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.abrep.2019.100226)

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