INTRODUCTION:

Acceptability of the harmful drinking culture in Ireland is widespread across all societies, including adolescents. According to the 2015 Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey of 10-17-year-olds, 46% of children reported ever drinking, 21% reported being current drinkers, and 18% reported having been drunk in the last 30 days (Kelly et al., 2012). Studies have shown that risky drinking behaviours in young people are associated with negative psychological, social and physical health consequences including impaired brain development.

There is a growing body of evidence, using a variety of methodologies, which suggests that alcohol marketing influences drinking behaviour and drinking intentions of adolescents (Hasinasso et al., 2005; Austin, Chen, & Obradovic, 2006; Hurtz et al., 2007; McCloskey et al., 2006). Many of these data have also been pooled in systematic reviews which confirm similar findings across various studies (Anderson et al., 2009; Smith & Fourest, 2009). Ownership of Alcohol Branded Merchandise (ABM) has also been shown to predict initiation of alcohol use (Ratcliffe et al., 2007; Fisher et al., 2007; Henriksen, et al., 2008) and to be associated with binge drinking (McCloskey et al., 2009). In addition to this, Gordon and colleagues (2011) found online marketing strategies which require audience participation (e.g. games, quizzes), to be significantly associated with current drinking behaviours.

These sophisticated marketing strategies, which integrate a complex mix of traditional media channels with online promotion, event sponsorship, alcohol branded merchandise and the development of new and attractive products (Kitson, 2012), have contributed to the exacerbation of children’s exposure to alcohol marketing in recent years.

As yet, limited research has been carried out in the Irish context that examines adolescents’ exposure to alcohol marketing and its potential relationship with their alcohol drinking behaviours.

Aim: This study aimed to investigate adolescents’ exposure to different types of alcohol marketing in Ireland, and the relationship between exposure and adolescents’ alcohol drinking behaviours.

In order to achieve this aim, the researchers set out to meet the following objectives:

1. To describe levels of alcohol marketing exposure and engagement among a sample of adolescents attending post-primary schools in Ireland.
2. To explore associations between alcohol marketing exposure and engagement with drinking intentions and drinking behaviour.

METHODS:

This study employed a cross-sectional design and data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire and an alcohol marketing diary. The study population consisted of young people aged 13-17 years, attending post-primary schools in Ireland.

Sixteen schools across Dublin, Cork and Galway agreed to participate in the study, and in each school three classes between 2nd and 5th year were randomly selected to be invited to participate, resulting in a sample of 686 children who took part in the study.

The aim of the study was to assess the degree and nature of exposure to alcohol marketing among adolescents, and to investigate the relationship between exposure to alcohol marketing and alcohol drinking behaviour in adolescents.

Three different measures of alcohol marketing exposure were used:

1. Referring to all types of marketing and via all media.
2. Engagement, referring to active involvement in alcohol marketing, beyond passive exposure to advertisements.
3. Intensity of exposure, referring to the extent to which one is exposed to all type of alcohol marketing.

These measures, among others regarding drinking behaviours, intentions to drink and socio-demographic factors, were assessed through a self-administered questionnaire and an alcohol marketing diary.

CONCLUSION:

Findings from this study, consistent with previous research, clearly indicate that the higher the intensity of exposure to alcohol marketing, the greater the risk of drinking alcohol and engaging in risky drinking behaviours.

The bottom line is that the current regulatory system does not protect children from exposure to alcohol marketing and this failure is associated with increased consumption. Creating an environment where children are free from alcohol marketing is a children’s rights issue that requires immediate attention.

A staggering 91% of children in this study reported exposure to traditional (offline) alcohol advertisements, 61% reported ownership of ABM and 77% (significantly more girls than boys) reported being exposed to online alcohol marketing, including via social media.

While 72% of children in this study reported that they had seen advertisements for an alcohol product on social media, 35% were invited to ‘like’ an alcohol brand via social media; 35% were invited to ‘like’ an alcohol sponsored event, and 21% were invited to go to such an event.

Overall, more girls were exposed to most types of social media-related marketing.

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