



## LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 4 to 8  
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# Kids, Alcohol and Advertising: Messages About Drinking



This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

## Overview

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In this lesson, students look at the different groups in our society that deliver messages to the public about drinking and consider the influence of each of these groups on the attitudes and perceptions of young people. Beginning by brainstorming words or ideas associated with the word “beer,” the class develops a mind map of people and organizations that deliver messages to us about alcohol and drinking and the different messages that each provides.

## Learning Outcomes

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Students will demonstrate:

- a beginning awareness of their own attitudes toward drinking
- an understanding of the different groups that deliver messages about alcohol
- an understanding of the specific messages that are expressed within these groups
- an awareness of the influence of specific groups or individuals on their own attitudes and beliefs about alcohol

## Preparation and Materials

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- Before beginning this lesson, read the teaching backgrounder *Alcohol Advertising and Kids*
- For the mind map exercise, refer to the handout *Mind Map: Where Do We Get Messages about Alcohol?*



## Procedure

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Tell students they will be looking at all the different messages that kids receive about alcohol.

Begin with a simple word association game. On the board, write the word BEER in big letters. Ask students to write down the first word or expression that comes into their minds when they see that word. Elect two students to record responses on one side of the board and then ask the class to share the words or expressions that came into their heads. Once their responses have been recorded, take a moment to step back and discuss them with students. Are they generally favourable, neutral or negative?

Every day we are surrounded by countless messages about drinking. (This should be reflected in the wide range of words and expressions that students associate with BEER.) Ask students to think about the questions: "Where do we get messages about alcohol? Who are the people and the organizations that try to influence our attitudes about drinking?" (See the *Mind Map* handout for an overview.) Based on the model provided, and your students' suggestions, create a mind map on the board. (For younger grades, you may want to use a simplified version.) Once your mind map is completed, review the BEER words that students have provided.

Ask students to match various words or messages about beer with appropriate groups in the mind map. (*Words can be connected to more than one group. For example, "party" and "fun" might be associated with media or friends and peers and social media; "drink responsibly" and "don't drink and drive" might be associated with school, government or medical and anti-drinking groups; "tasty" and "cold" might be associated with alcohol industry, media, government liquor stores, and so on.*)

Once this is done, take a look at each of these groups and ask students to think about the different messages each group delivers about drinking. Be prepared for a wide range of answers, and don't be surprised to find conflicting messages from within the same group. For example, under *family*, the general message from parents and/or trusted adults might be that drinking is for adults and that kids shouldn't drink; from older siblings, it might be that drinking is fun.

Once this is done, ask students:

- Which of these groups gives us the most positive messages about drinking? Why might this be so? (*Guide them to consider motivation – for example, the media and alcohol industries make money from advertising and selling alcoholic beverages.*)
- Which of these groups gives us the most negative messages about drinking? Why might this be so?
- Do any of these groups have conflicting messages about drinking? (*For example, the alcohol industry creates both ad campaigns and social responsibility messages; some friends and peer groups may support drinking, others may not.*) How do you feel about these "mixed messages"?

## Thinking about Messages

### Discuss:

Every day, we are surrounded by thousands of messages that inform, entertain and educate us. Some of these messages try to sell us things, some want to influence how we think and behave, while others try to keep us safe. All want to persuade us one way or another.



Before deciding whether or not to listen to or believe a particular message, we need to ask some questions.

- Think about everything we've discussed today. What are some questions that you should ask about messages?

Answers might include:

- Who is behind this message? (*A company? An advertiser? A health practitioner? My parents? A friend?*)
- What is the message? (*"Buy my product"? "Don't participate in high-risk activities"? "Learn about this so you can be better informed"? "Do this because it's fun"?*)
- How is the person or organization trying to convince me to listen to their message? (*Making it sound like fun? Stressing that this is really important? Making it appear to be a cool thing?*)
- Is the person or organization qualified to tell me what to do? (*For example, is my friend experienced enough to help me make decisions that might affect my health? Is this celebrity or influencer being paid to promote a product to me? Would that affect their opinion of it? Should I trust them? Should advertisers have a say in what foods we need? Is this website a credible source for my homework assignment?*)
- And, most importantly, why is this person or organization sending me a message? What is their motivation? (*To sell me things? To get me to influence other people? Because they care about my safety and well-being?*)

### Homework

In their notebooks have students write a short paragraph outlining the word or expression they associated with BEER at the beginning of the class, and what they think may have influenced their word choice.



## Alcohol Advertising and Kids

The number of alcohol ads that young people are exposed to, according to a 2016 study of 600 youth ages 11-13, is about three ads a day.<sup>1</sup> This may not sound like a lot but that is 1,000 ads created by alcohol companies each year, which has been proven to induce underage drinking in youth.<sup>2</sup> The participants saw the majority of ads outside on billboards or signs (38%) and on television commercials (26%), with girls being exposed to 30% more ads than boys.<sup>3</sup> The alcohol they encountered on these ads was 66% for beer, 23% for distilled spirits and 17% for wine.<sup>4</sup>

Ad spending by the alcohol industry has risen too: in 2016 approximately 1.59 billion U.S. dollars was spent on beer advertising in the United States,<sup>5</sup> and in 2019 approximately 486.1 million U.S. dollars was spent on distilled spirits advertising.<sup>6</sup> Alcohol brands spend four times more than the average brand on out of home advertising and twice as more on TV advertising.<sup>7</sup> With beer companies, such as Budweiser spending upwards of \$25 million USD on Superbowl advertisements, it is very clear that companies rely on their advertising to reach their intended and unintended audiences.<sup>8</sup> These numbers are predicted to increase in 2021 in the post pandemic lifestyle, with an alcohol ad expenditure expected to rise \$7.7 billion in 2023 with a 5.3% rate of growth.<sup>9</sup> Although Canada represents a much smaller market, it is still one of the twelve key markets alongside, Australia, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Russia, Spain, Switzerland, the UK and the US who altogether account for 73% of total global alcohol advertising expenditure.<sup>10</sup>

Digital advertising “is set to account for 30% of alcohol advertising spending in 2023, up from 21% in 2019” as target markets move more towards digital channels and social media.

Zenith AOI Agency Business Intelligence  
report on Alcohol: Beer + Spirits

Should we be concerned? It's well established that alcohol related deaths happen within teens with common causes including, murders alcohol poisoning, falls, burns, drowning and suicide.<sup>11</sup> In 2018, Statistics Canada published that 19.1% of “Canadians aged 12 and older (...5.9 million people) reported alcohol consumption that classified them as heavy drinkers” this number includes the fact that 25.6% of Canadian youth aged 12-17 reported consuming at least one alcoholic drink in the last 12 months.<sup>12</sup>

Add to this the engaging, interactive and unregulated milieu of the Internet, and marketers have a potent mix of platforms from which to target youth.

Child development experts have voiced concerns about the possible links between children's exposure to alcohol advertising and the development of attitudes about alcohol and drinking habits. The countless alcohol-related media young people are exposed to reinforce the idea that alcohol consumption is an everyday activity – nothing more than harmless, rebellious fun.

Constant exposure to alcohol products – especially at an early age – increases positive expectations about drinking.<sup>13</sup> For example, in a study of 600 youth aged 11-13 years old, they reported more favourable views of alcohol brands following exposure to advertisements. This meant that “at moments of exposure, their beliefs looked like those of youth 12 months older”.<sup>14</sup>

Sports are another way that alcohol ads reach kids. In Australia, it is estimated that children and youth are exposed to more than 20 million alcohol advertisements in televised sports programs during the daytime.<sup>15</sup> This is not just in Australia, but an international phenomenon that is becoming increasingly concerning, with a 2016 study confirming a correlation between exposure to alcohol advertising and the consumption of the alcohol brands advertised. The study looked at 1,000 13-20 year olds in the United States and found that those who had not been exposed to ads drank 14



times per month, those who were exposed to an average amount of ads drank 33 times per month and those who were over exposed drank 200 plus drinks per month.<sup>16</sup> As it is not only the prevalence to drink that is affected when youth view these advertisements during sport, but also their alcohol product selected.<sup>17</sup> Alcohol promotion through commercials in sports programming or sponsorship of sports teams and events provides companies with tremendous exposure – before, during and after an event. It creates positive associations between drinking and the traits associated with athletes and teams: strength, loyalty, endurance, success, health, vitality, fun, fitness and speed.

Many alcohol ads play on the theme that drinking is the primary ritual into adulthood in our society, because it is normalized. This is clearly seen with liquor stores, agencies and other retail outlets selling \$22.5 billion worth of alcoholic beverages in 2016-2017 in Canada, with the net income for provincial and territorial liquor authorities being \$6.5 billion.<sup>18</sup> Then there are the companies who turn soft drinks into alcoholic drinks. Alcopop is a new phenomenon among youth where they drink these “sweet, colorful and fizzy drinks ...[that] now contain almost as much alcohol as a six-pack of beer in a single can, and young drinkers don’t know how much these drinks can affect them”.<sup>19</sup>

Although most children don’t start drinking until the pre-teen or teen years, children as young as four can tell the difference between wine and beer based on the shape of the bottle and children as young as five start to match alcohol brands to the sports teams that they sponsor.<sup>20</sup> It has been discussed that kids under the age of 7 cannot determine persuasive intent in advertising and so believe the advertisements they view in the media to be a part of real life. This is dangerous when it comes to alcohol advertisements, as children could believe that the images being depicted are real and the stereotypes they follow are also valid.<sup>21</sup>

“ I think it’s another good argument for limiting screen time, because alcohol advertising is pervasive even among shows that may be watched by a large number of underage youth.”

-Dr. Timothy Naimi, associate professor at Boston University’s Schools of Medicine and Public Health.

Although youth are being exposed to advertisements via billboards and tv advertisements, social media plays a large role in influencing their behaviour surrounding the consumption of alcohol in order to fit in socially.<sup>22</sup> This is because “75% of teens aged 12 to 17 claim that seeing pictures on social media depicting their friends and schoolmates drinking and using drugs motivated them to mimic their behaviours”.<sup>23</sup>

## An Educational Response

Advertising is just one part of a continuum of factors that contribute to a young person's inclination to drink. Other contributing factors are heredity, personality and behavioural traits, peer and family influences, environment and societal attitudes.

An educational response to this issue must consider each of these potential influences in order to help students better understand and contextualize the multiple – and often conflicting – messages they receive about drinking. Equally important is parental or trusted adult involvement at home in encouraging discussion about alcohol messages in media. Studying these messages gives young people the opportunity to consider all the factors that contribute to underage drinking habits, and to compare and contrast their own attitudes and perceptions of young people with those projected by marketers.

**Early years:** Research suggests that children under six do not understand the purpose of advertising<sup>24</sup> and so this is a good time for parents and teachers to start helping children think critically about what they see and to introduce them to the marketing strategies advertisers use to create positive associations with alcoholic beverages.



**Middle years:** This age group represents a critical period for decision-making about alcohol consumption. In the recent Canadian Drug Summary, it was reported that the overall prevalence of alcohol use in the past year among students in grades 7-12 was 44%. The increase in the prevalence of alcohol in grades 7-9 rose substantially from 23.1% among students to 64.5%.<sup>25</sup> Although young teens may lack the life experience to judge mass media messages, with guidance they can develop the critical skills they need to understand and pick apart media messages.

**Older teens:** As teens grow older, they associate drinking more and more strongly with things such as fun, socialization and sex, and less and less with negative experiences. Canadian Students had expectations that through the consumption of alcohol, only positive outcomes could arise as they expected to have fun or a good time, relax and be less stressed overall.<sup>26</sup> In a Canadian study, 110 students aged 17 to 30 seemed to have misconceptions about binge drinking, as they reported that the average number of drinks they could consume without negative side effects was five, and the negative side effects referred to were always physical, such as hangovers, as they seemed to be unaware of other potential cognitive damages.<sup>27</sup>

Because of this, older teens need to question the broader, societal ramifications of the alcohol industry and alcohol advertising: their rights and roles as consumers, the true cost of alcohol consumption, and the tension between current regulations relating to the marketing of alcohol to minors and advertising strategies that fly in the face of these laws. They need to be given the opportunity to measure the effectiveness of anti-drinking campaigns and assume a proactive stance by creating their own strategies for providing realistic messages about drinking to peers and younger children.

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## Mind Map: Where Do We Get Messages about Alcohol?

