

# Addiction & the Humanities, Vol. 7(4) - Encouraging underage Facebook users to become Alcohol users: Are alcohol advertisements on Facebook promoting more than the product?

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Alcohol exposure, especially through social media marketing, is a risk factor for early underage drinking initiation (Gordon, MacKintosh, & Moodie, 2010). Using social media to market alcohol also is associated with increased alcohol consumption among underage drinkers (Anderson, de Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009). Despite Facebook's solicitation of paid product advertising, as well as its efforts to expand users from individual college students to high schoolers (Mart, Mergendoller, & Simon, 2009), the literature examining alcohol content and underage drinking on Facebook, the most popular of social networking sites, is surprisingly scarce. This week's issue of *Addiction & the Humanities* reviews findings from a recent qualitative survey (Mart et al., 2009; adapted in CESAR FAX, 2011) and discusses the implications of this study for youth, the alcohol industry, and Facebook.

## Methods

- Mart et al. created two fake Facebook user profiles—one 21-year old user and one under-21 user—and searched the following 5 Facebook features for each users' access to alcohol-related content:
  - *Ads*: Companies buy ad space and access Facebook users' profile information to target online advertisements.
  - *Pages*: A profile page of an organization or a particular product, as opposed to an individual's personal page.
  - *Applications*: Third party developed features including games and quizzes (See Figure 1 for an example).
  - *Events*: This feature allows individual Facebook users and

businesses to create a page to inform people of the time, location, and purpose of a particular event and to invite people as well.

- *Groups*: This feature is a page that can be created by any Facebook user about any topic of interest. When a user joins a particular group they are listed as a member of that group.
- For each Facebook feature, the investigators separately entered search terms for the 10 top-selling beer brands (e.g., “Budweiser”, “Miller Lite”, “Natural Lite”), the 10 top-selling hard liquor brands (e.g., “Smirnoff”, “Bacardi”, “Captain Morgan”), popular youth brands (e.g., “Malibu” and “Mike’s Hard Lemonade”), and alcohol-related terms including “alcohol”, “binge”, “shots”, and “nightlife”.

## Results

- Table 1 displays the study’s results regarding underage (i.e., <21 years) exposure to alcohol content. In brief, the under-21 user was able to access nearly all of the alcohol-related content searched on Facebook. The vast majority of this content was not available through sponsored advertisements; instead, this material was accessible through Facebook’s other less regulated features (e.g., Events and Groups).

**Table 1- Underage access to alcohol-related content by Facebook feature**

Facebook feature	Search term	Amount of alcohol-related content	% accessible to the under-21 user
Advertisements	N/A	1 out of every 8 ads	100 %
Pages	Twelve top-selling beer and liquor brands	427 pages (93 beer; 334 liquor)	50 % (6 out of 12 reviewed)
Applications	“Alcohol”	500	67 % (4 out of 6 reviewed)
Events	Five best-selling beer and liquor brands	4,400 (2,200 beer; 2,200 liquor)	100 %
Groups	“Alcohol”	58,000 (5,000 specific to top-selling beer brands; 5,000 for top-selling liquor brands)	100 %

**Figure 1. Facebook Application: "Shots and Drinks!"**

The screenshot shows the Facebook app page for 'Shots and Drinks!'. The page features a search bar at the top, a 'Like' button, and a 'Go to App' button. The main content area is divided into sections: 'Basic Information', 'Description of Application', 'Shots and Drinks', 'FAQ', and 'About the Developer'. The 'Shots and Drinks' section contains a poem about drinking. The 'FAQ' section lists questions and answers regarding the app's functionality. The 'About the Developer' section identifies the developer as OneTwoThree Inc.

**facebook** Search

**SHOTS**

**Shots and Drinks!** Like Go to App

App

**Basic Information**

**Description of Application**

**Shots and Drinks**  
 Miss your drinking buddy? No need to fear. When Facebook Shots and Drinks are here. Party it up online with all of your friends. Increase your drinking level and skills, with more sends. With drinks for every occasion, there's so much to do. You can represent your country and donate a shot too. So send mudslide, fuzzy navel, and liquid cocaine, For all the fun and none of the pain!

Don't forget! Become our Fan and stay up to date on our NEW Shots and Drinks!!! Click on the "Become a Fan" button. Can't get enough of Shots and Drinks? [Write a Five Star review!!](#)

**FAQ**  
**Q:** How many Shots can I send?  
**A:** However many facebook lets you send per day.  
**Q:** I have sent my friend multiple Shots and his Drinking Level hasn't changed! How come?  
**A:** Your friend must add the app first.  
**Q:** Why does my Drinking Level Change?  
**A:** Your Mood drops a little every day, so Keep Smiling.  
**Q:** How do I increase my Drinking Skills?  
**A:** As you drink more people, your Drinking Skills will get better!

**About the Developer**  
**Developer Name** OneTwoThree Inc

**Info**  
 Wall  
 Discussions  
 Reviews  
 FBML

**Review Summary**  
 ★★★★★ (4.9 out of 5)  
 Based on 3,267 reviews

**1,105**  
 monthly active users

**Category**  
 Lifestyle

This app was **not** developed by Facebook.

[Add to My Page](#)  
[Block App](#)  
[Contact Developer](#)  
[Report App](#)  
[Share](#)

## Limitations

- This study was not a systematic empirical study. Hence, its findings are limited to Facebook and might not generalize to other social media.

## Conclusions

The results of this review suggest that Facebook is falling short of its own alcohol policies. Consider the following provision outlined in its *Advertising Guidelines*, which states that “all viewer restrictions for alcohol-related Facebook Pages must be set at twenty-one years or older” (Facebook.com). Mart et al. found various loopholes in the Applications, Pages, Events, and Groups features of Facebook that permitted the underage user almost full access to alcohol-related content. Such features allow for individuals to be in charge of posting content; thus, the majority of Facebook’s alcohol-related content is not paid advertising and is

subject to very few guidelines. Furthermore, the open nature of these components has rendered it nearly impossible to determine who actually is posting what content. Consequently, “the line between corporate advertising and user-generated content is almost completely blurred” (Mart et al., 2009). This situation presents an even greater challenge to the successful enforcement of age restriction policies. However, because media exposure is a determinant of young adults’ early initiation of substance use which, in turn, predicts a variety of subsequent substance-related problems among this group (e.g., dependency, mental health problems, lower academic performance, unprotected sex, etc.), it is crucial for alcohol and drug policy-makers to take into account the issues of control and accountability for posting substance-related content online, and for Facebook to enforce viewer restrictions relevant to many of its features beyond paid advertisements.

-Brittany Bannon

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

## References

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