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# A tale of two urbanities: Adolescent alcohol and cigarette consumption in high and low-poverty urban neighborhoods

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## ABSTRACT

Urbanicity encompasses the different aspects of living in an urban area. While past research treats urban areas as homogeneous, this research employs an empirical study to show how intra-urban differences by poverty are associated with cigarette and alcohol consumption by adolescents. Results demonstrate that for higher poverty adolescents, those living in urban versus less urban areas consume significantly more alcohol and cigarettes. At the same time, for wealthier adolescents, those living in urban versus less urban areas consume significantly fewer of those items. The results are mediated by convenience store density, contributing to our understanding of the relationship between urban environments, specific area characteristics and problem consumption among adolescents. The results suggest that it might be useful to consider new ways of understanding problem consumption by studying distinct aspects of urbanicity related to the retail environment.

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## 1. Introduction

Alcohol and cigarettes are potentially compulsive products that are also restricted for purchase by adolescent consumers (Martin et al., 2013). Illegal consumption of alcohol and cigarettes in adolescence greatly heightens risk for progression to compulsive consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, cannabis, and hard drugs in adulthood (DeWit, Adlaf, Offord, & Ogborne, 2000; Lewinsohn, Rohde, & Brown, 1999). Therefore, research on marketing and compulsive consumption would benefit from a greater understanding of adolescent illegal consumption and the marketing environment around schools.

Nationally in the United States, over a 1/3 of high school students have tried cigarettes and 66.2% had had at least one drink (Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, 2013). Policymakers and public health advocates emphasize the role of accessibility as a key influence on youth behavior, implicating marketer distribution strategies as a focal concern. Recent research aimed at understanding the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes among adolescents increasingly emphasizes the role of urban contexts in facilitating accessibility and behavior given ongoing urbanization. The proportion of the world's population living in urban areas increased fifty percent from 1975 to 2005; and by 2050, the world's population living in urban areas is expected to grow to 6 billion people (United Nations-Habitat, 2006). As a result of increases

in urban living, the number of adolescents going to schools in urban areas is over 31% of the population in the United States (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2004). Urban environments influence what adolescents eat and drink, where they access health care, and other factors that influence their consumption behaviors (Galea, Freudenberg, & Vlahov, 2005).

While urban areas are generally perceived as concentrating social problems and risk for problem consumption (Vlahov & Galea, 2002), these areas also vary in terms of characteristics that may influence problem consumption. We refer to alcohol and cigarette consumption as “problem consumption” because underage adolescents (henceforth, “adolescents”) in this context may not legally consume them. In the present research, we ask “How does being situated in an urban versus less urban area relate to adolescent alcohol and cigarette consumption, and do these relationships vary depending on the specific characteristics of the urban area?” Identifying heterogeneity in risk promoting or protective factors in urban areas is important to understanding the role of urban environments on adolescent consumption behaviors. The distinct aspects of living in urban areas is reflected in the concept of *urbanicity*, which captures the specific characteristics of an urban area (Vlahov & Galea, 2002). Urban areas are by definition more densely populated with people embedded in an infrastructure which supports high-density living, and which may include increased access to retail outlets. For example, a store located in a rural area is likely to be close to only a few people within a few blocks, while a store located in an urban area is likely to be close to many people within a few blocks. The utility of place-related strategies in marketing reflects the value added by making products and services accessible to consumers when

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and where they need them (Wilkie & Moore, 1999). Thus, geography-related marketing decisions influence consumption by affecting the availability of goods and services to consumers. In fact, understanding geographic patterns in relation to consumer demand is an integral and growing part of marketing strategy (Bronnenberg, Dhar, & Dubé, 2007). However, we posit that there may be differences inside urban areas important to consumption.

Consumer researchers have considered how behavior may be influenced by various settings within which it occurs and have demonstrated that people's surroundings when they are at school, work or home exert both direct and indirect influences on their consumption opportunities and options (Belk, 1975; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989). However, none to our knowledge has explored urban areas and the relationship to adolescent consumption, or whether urban areas have distinct associations across consumer segments. When research in marketing considers local geographic surroundings, the emphasis is generally on gaining insights to support commercial goals (Fox & Hoch, 2005) and not potentially hazardous consumption patterns. Research in marketing has indeed examined cigarette and alcohol consumption among youth, yet the focus has been on the effects of advertising (Pechmann, Levine, Loughlin, & Leslie, 2005), individual characteristics that may promote usage (Rose, Bearden, & Manning, 1996), or social marketing interventions to halt consumption (Goldberg, 1997). The relationship of product distribution and potential effects of accessibility has been less examined in the marketing literature.

Although multiple other disciplines (e.g., public health, health policy and geography) have examined accessibility issues, the lack of research on urban versus less urban areas or urbanicity (i.e., urban heterogeneity) from a marketing perspective is significant given the increasing social concern and public scrutiny regarding the impact of location-related marketing strategies on problem consumption (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Retailers have come under fire regarding geography-oriented product distribution such as when the density of retail outlets that sell alcohol and cigarettes has been linked to the disproportionate use of the products (McCarthy et al., 2009; Novak, Reardon, Raudenbush, & Buka, 2006; Scribner, Cohen, & Fisher, 2000; Weitzman, Folkman, Folkman, & Wechsler, 2003). More generally, given an increased emphasis on environmental influences, public health scholars argue that corporate decisions about production and marketing may have greater influence on population health than the decisions of public health officials (Freudenberg & Galea, 2008).

The focus of the present study is on cigarette and alcohol consumption by adolescents living in urban areas and how this varies based on area income. We focus on adolescents because they are establishing behavioral patterns related to cigarette and alcohol consumption that may persist over time. Although there is increasing recognition of adolescents as vulnerable consumers based on their inexperience and risk-seeking orientation, they are a relatively under-researched consumer group (Pechmann et al., 2005). We build on several emerging areas of study where marketing and consumer researchers have been relatively silent: urbanicity (Talukdar, 2008), adolescent poverty (Blocker et al., 2013) and addictive products (Martin et al., 2013). First, we describe the relationship between urbanicity and consumption generally, with a focus on adolescent consumption of tobacco and alcohol. We then discuss how area income in urban areas may lead to heterogeneous influences on adolescents' consumption behaviors within urban areas and develop our hypotheses related to intra-urban differences. We hypothesize that area income changes the relationship between living in urban areas and consumption so that, for high-poverty neighborhoods, living in an urban area is related to more cigarette and alcohol consumption due to increased access to retail like convenience stores. Alternatively, for lower-poverty neighborhoods, we posit that living in urban area is related to less cigarette and alcohol consumption given less access to retail like convenience stores. Results tell a "tale of two urbanities."

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Urbanicity and consumption

It is expected that almost two-thirds of the world's population will live in urban areas within the next 30 years. The increasing urbanization of populations worldwide is consistent with an increasing geographic focus in marketing given the relationship of geography to consumption. Urbanization is a concept which emphasizes the dynamics of geographic concentration of individuals and the process that underlies the growth of cities and the observed features of urban areas (Vlahov & Galea, 2002). Operationally, when examining the relationship between urban environments and problem consumption outcomes, the specific nature of urban environments becomes important (Dahly & Adair, 2007). The heterogeneous nature of urban environments is reflected in the concept of urbanicity (Vlahov & Galea, 2002). Since local environments may have both positive and negative effects on behavior, understanding specific urban characteristics that may differentially relate to problem consumption is important (Galea & Vlahov, 2005; Vlahov & Galea, 2002).

Urban living conditions, including individual behavior, demographic composition, the physical environment and service systems, shape the consumption of area residents (Galea & Vlahov, 2005). Market dynamics are an integral characteristic of urban contexts that influence the choices that people make with regard to consumption behaviors such as eating, drinking and smoking. Markets facilitate the allocation of physical and social resources (e.g. food, medical care, transportation, social networks), and play a key role in shaping the health of populations (Galea et al., 2005; Talukdar, 2008). Research in Public Health argues that urban markets influence the health of residents of some neighborhoods by making problem products affordable and excessively available (Galea & Vlahov, 2005). At core, consumption behaviors characterized as compulsive or problematic, including smoking cigarettes and drinking alcoholic beverages, are presumed to be facilitated by the increased consumer accessibility to those products in urban areas.

Youth accessibility to alcohol and cigarettes has been of particular concern in the public health and public policy literature. National and retail policies restrict the age of purchase and consumption of these products to curb access until adolescents reach maturity. In the United States, the legal age to purchase tobacco products is 18 years of age and 21 years of age for alcohol. Nonetheless, ample research suggests that adolescents find ways to procure and consume both products. Recent data from the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Study (YBRSS) shows that nationally, 41% of high school students had tried cigarettes and 15.7% were current smokers (defined as having smoked at least 1 day in the 30 days prior to the survey). In terms of alcohol, 66.2% had had at least one drink while 34.9% were current drinkers (defined as having alcohol at least 1 day in the 30 days prior to the survey). In addition, longitudinal research suggests that neither alcohol nor cigarettes are difficult for adolescents to access. Almost 50% of eighth graders and 71% of tenth graders say cigarettes are easy for them to get (National Institute on Drug Abuse & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013). This finding is consistent with a recent nationally representative study which showed that more than 60% of under aged minors (i.e., under the age of 18) were successful in doing so (Filippidis, Agaku, Connolly, & Vardavas, 2014). And when unsuccessful, research has found that teens use a variety of methods to obtain cigarettes and alcohol, including using a fake id, purchasing from non-compliant merchants, stealing them, or asking others to buy for them or to give them cigarettes (Harrison, Fulkerson, & Park, 2000).

Retail access is viewed as an important determinant of smoking and drinking behavior. Research among adolescent has shown that retail proximity to convenience stores, bars and alcohol outlets is associated with the consumption of both cigarettes and alcohol (Henriksen et al., 2008; Kuntsche, Kuendig, & Gmel, 2008; Novak et al., 2006). For example, Novak et al. (2006) showed that proximity to tobacco retail sites is

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