Dear Editor,

In 2012, the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs published a study (Clapp et al., 2012) that investigated alcohol availability for underage customers in the growing number of supermarkets with self-checkout lanes. In that study, the self-checkout unit failed to require identification in 9.2% of the alcohol purchases, and an overall 8.8% of all purchase observations resulted in a failure to ask for identification to purchase alcohol. Clapp et al. concluded that the growing number of self-checkout lanes in supermarkets can be a potential alcohol source for minors but suggested that this risk is similar to traditional checkout purchases.

Recently, we focused on actual alcohol availability through self-checkout lines in the Netherlands, by making use of undercover purchase attempts. Eight minors, all 17 years old, participated as mystery shoppers on two different weekends, with four mystery shoppers each weekend. All mystery shoppers visited five supermarkets with self-checkout lanes and tried to buy as much alcohol as possible. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral Sciences of the University of Twente approved the research protocol.

The “rules” for the study were that the mystery shoppers were (a) allowed to buy the alcohol only by themselves, (b) not allowed to offend vendors, (c) permitted to enter the five outlets only a maximum of three times, and (d) allowed only to carry the alcoholic beverages (i.e., shopping carts could not be used). In contrast to previous studies with strict purchase protocols (e.g., Gosselt et al., 2007, 2011; Van Hoof et al., 2012, 2015), the mystery shoppers were instructed to act as they would in real life (e.g., they could enter alone, in a small group).

The findings suggest that the current self-checkout technology and procedures in these Dutch supermarkets fail to comply with the legislation aimed at preventing underage alcohol sales and are clearly the weakest link when it comes to alcohol availability. When age-restricted alcohol-containing products are offered to the self-checkout terminal, the system recognizes all age-restricted products as such, and in all purchases an ID was asked by the system. Because we made use of underage mystery shoppers, we were able to evaluate the entire purchase process. It seemed that that store vendors did not show up in a large majority (62%) of all alcohol purchases, and, if they were present at the time of the purchase, they often did not restrict the sale. In total, of the 134 alcohol purchase attempts, alcohol was purchased 119 times; the purchase was disapproved 15 times, which represents an average compliance of 11.2%. A total amount of 854.67 L (225.78 U.S. gallons) of alcohol-containing beverages were purchased. The mystery shoppers purchased their beverage of choice, which resulted in a total of 581.94 L (153.73 U.S. gallons) of beer, 233.98 L (61.81 U.S. gallons) of wine, and 38.75 L (10.24 U.S. gallons) of pre-mixed beverages. Unless a better method can be implemented, policymakers should consider banning alcohol sales in self-checkout lanes.

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References


