ALCOHOL HEALTH ALLIANCE

No escape:

How alcohol advertising preys on children and vulnerable people

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Introduction

"Alcohol and its marketing is everywhere and is difficult to get away from – as a carer of someone with alcohol dependency I am aware that she struggles not to be influenced by the constant barrage of the culture of drinking." Caroline

Alcohol and alcohol marketing is commonplace in the UK: billboards on the street telling us about the world's best beer, gin or whisky; commercials on TV showing friends having a good time together on the beach with a glass of something in their hands; pop-up adverts online nudging us to buy the newest craft beer advent calendar; adverts in magazines encouraging us to reward ourselves and enjoy 'wine o'clock' after a hard day; alcohol logos popping up everywhere at our favourite sports matches and festivals; and greeting cards wishing us a 'gin-tastic' day or an 'un-beer-lievable birthday'.

This prevalence of alcohol marketing helps to normalise – and often glamourise – alcohol and creates a culture where alcohol is seen as an 'essential part' of everyday life.

At the same time, about 70 people die from alcohol every day across the UK.[1] Alcohol is the largest risk factor for death, ill-health and disability for 15-49-year-olds and connected to more than 200 health conditions, including cancer, liver disease and stroke.[2]

Alcohol does not only impact individuals and their friends and families, but also our society as a whole. It costs NHS England about £3.5 billion every year, and the total cost to society is estimated at £27 billion.[3]

A&E Doctor Adam Colins explains: *"alcohol-related illness and injury is a huge burden on the NHS and it has a major impact on people's lives. We see this impact every day in the emergency department, but you never really get used to it. I still feel disbelief at the scale of the issue."*[4]

Alcohol is also involved in about 40% of crime and takes up more than half of police time.[5] It can contribute to family breakdown and can have long-lasting impacts for children growing up with alcohol dependent parents.[6]

Alexandra, an expert by experience, describes the impact alcohol had on her childhood: *"I stayed in my bedroom, it was like a cage but the safest place possible. I was too scared to leave or to talk to anyone. The solution was to be invisible and quiet, hoping she [my mother] would not come after me. But she did. She abused me, and my dad, mentally, emotionally, sometimes physically."*[7]

This report focuses on people's experience of alcohol marketing. It explores what alcohol marketing is and where we come across it, what role it plays in contributing to alcohol harm and what can be done to reduce it.

Evidence shows that alcohol marketing directly increases the consumption of alcohol – and thus alcohol harm – including that among children and young people. Exposure to alcohol marketing increases the likelihood that children will start to drink alcohol at an earlier age and drink more than they otherwise would.[8]

Moreover, people in recovery and those trying to stop drinking have highlighted how alcohol marketing can make it more difficult to stay sober. Donna explained: *"being an ex-addict, advertising alcohol, especially during holidays can heighten my cravings for consumption."*

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends comprehensive restrictions on alcohol marketing as one of the most effective and cost-effective policies to reduce alcohol harm.[9] Currently, alcohol marketing in the UK is regulated by a complicated system of self and co-regulation with the alcohol and advertising industry. Various codes and different bodies are responsible for different parts of marketing. This has led to an inconsistent and ineffective system, which fails to protect children and vulnerable people.[10]

The UK Government has acknowledged that the advertising of potentially harmful products needs better regulation. It has proposed new advertising restrictions for 'less healthy food and drink', including a 9pm watershed for TV and on-demand services, as well as a ban of online advertising.

Alcohol is currently excluded from these proposals – despite the fact that deaths from alcohol rose by 20% to an all-time high in 2020 in England and Wales.[11] Given the health and social impact alcohol has and the harm it can cause, it is essential that alcohol is included in these proposals and that new comprehensive restrictions are introduced for alcohol marketing.

The Scottish Government has committed to consulting on alcohol marketing restrictions in 2022.

Recommendations

The UK Government needs to introduce restrictions on alcohol marketing to protect children and vulnerable people.

> In the short term, alcohol should be included in the restrictions proposed for 'unhealthy food and drink' in the Health and Care Bill, including a 9pm watershed on TV and on-demand services, as well as a complete online ban.

> In the longer term, the UK Government should introduce more comprehensive restrictions to limit exposure to alcohol marketing, in line with WHO recommendations.

Methodology and acknowledgements

As part of this report, we conducted a short online survey to gather people's views on the impact alcohol advertising has on them and their communities. Answers could be submitted anonymously. The survey was promoted through the AHA's networks and on social media. Unless otherwise noted, quotes used are from that survey.

We are grateful to Alcohol Change UK who adapted and promoted the survey through their channels. The survey ran in September-October 2021. In total, we received 222 responses.

We are also grateful to Cancer Research UK for sharing data from their commissioned study, the Youth Alcohol Policy Survey (YAPS) 2019, to be analysed and used in this report. The YAPS 2019 was a cross-sectional survey administered online to UK adolescents aged 11-19. The study was conducted by YouGov and in partnership with the University of Stirling and took place from September to November 2019. Total participation was 3,388, of which 2,575 were aged 11-17. The figures have been weighted to be representative of the adolescent population in the UK.

Views expressed in this report are those of the AHA and not necessarily those of Cancer Research UK, YouGov or the University of Stirling.

Alcohol Health Alliance UK

The Alcohol Health Alliance UK (AHA) is a coalition of more than 60 organisations working together to reduce the harm caused by alcohol. Our members include medical royal colleges, charities and treatment providers. AHA members work together to:

- highlight the rising levels of alcohol-related harm;
- propose evidence-based solutions to reduce this harm; and
- influence decision makers to take positive action to address the harm caused by alcohol.

What is alcohol marketing?

Marketing is the "business activity that involves finding out what customers want, using that information to design products and services, and selling them effectively".[12] Alcohol marketing communications focus on creating positive attitudes to brands and instilling the idea that alcohol consumption improves the experiences of life.

Diageo's Global Managing Director of Reserve Brands explained: *"what we're trying to be is part of people's regular everyday lives, that's the social fabric through our marketing."*[13]

A framework often used for marketing decision-making is 'the marketing mix'. In its original form, it is made up of 4 Ps: product, price, place, promotion.[14] While all these elements are important for successful product marketing and are often intertwined, this report will focus on the 'promotional' aspect of alcohol marketing.

Alcohol producers employ a complex range of strategies to promote their products, communicate with new and existing consumers, encourage sales and increase brand prominence over competitors. This includes – but is not limited to – advertising in traditional media outlets such as print, billboards, TV and radio; promotional activities online and on social media; and sponsorship of sporting, music and cultural events.

"Alcohol advertising is everywhere ... I come across alcohol advertising in magazines, newspapers, on billboard[s] and at the supermarket. I buy the Sunday Times every weekend, and find alcohol advertising in there." Raffaelle

Alcohol companies often argue that alcohol marketing is solely targeted at existing drinkers, encouraging them to switch brands. However, marketing leads to wider adverse consequences as advertising normalises drinking and also influences the choices of non-drinkers, including children and young people.[15]

It is also questionable whether 'brand switching' truly is the sole aim of alcohol marketing strategies, given the future profitability of the alcohol industry logically requires the continual recruitment of new generations of drinkers. Indeed, many brands see marketing as a key way to recruit new consumers and some specifically target the youngest demographics of legal drinkers.[16]

The importance of marketing to alcohol companies is demonstrated by the high level of investment made: the global marketing spending for six of the largest alcohol companies was estimated at US $17.7 billion in 2017.[17] AB InBev and Diageo – two of the world's largest alcohol producers – report spending 15% of their annual global sales on marketing.[18]

TV and on-demand streaming services

Alcohol promotion on TV and on-demand streaming services is very common in the UK. This takes two main forms: (a) exposure to alcohol ads during breaks from programming and (b) exposure to alcohol content during programmes.

Broadcast TV remains a key channel for brands to reach consumers: 92% of UK households are watching broadcast TV regularly. In 2020, people spent an average of 3 hours and 12 minutes per day watching TV.[19] On-demand viewing services have become increasingly more popular, with viewing of subscription on-demand services such as Netflix and Amazon almost doubling in 2020, to 1 hour 5 minutes per person per day. These services were used by 60% of all UK households.[20]

Around 650,000 alcohol adverts are shown on UK TV each year - almost half are broadcast before 9pm

Alcohol brands continue to rely on TV promotions, devoting almost half of their advertising budgets to TV – compared to 24% for the average brand.[21]

Studies have found that around 650,000 alcohol adverts are shown on UK TV each year. Almost half are broadcast before 9pm, during peak viewing hours for children and young people.[22]

Research has shown that alcohol imagery occurs in almost half of all advert/trailer periods and more than half of all programmes broadcast in peak viewing time on the most popular television channels in the UK. This was with a similar frequency both before and after 9pm.[23]

Moreover, some popular TV shows and genres are sponsored by alcohol companies. For example, 'Original Comedy' on Channel 4 is sponsored by beer brand Coors and 'Discovery and Adventure' on Channel 5 is sponsored by the wine brand Trivento.

Alcohol content is also frequently shown on TV shows popular with young people. For example, research into five different reality TV shows – *Celebrity Big Brother*, *Made in Chelsea*, *The Only Way is Essex*, *Geordie Shore* and *Love Island* – found that all of the 112 reviewed episodes contained alcohol imagery. Alcohol content appeared in 42% of one-minute intervals.[24] Combined with audience viewing figures, the researchers estimated that the 112 episodes delivered 4.9 billion alcohol impressions to the UK population, including 580 million to children under the age of 16.[25] Similar research has shown that alcohol content is also extremely common in soap operas popular with young people.[26]

The same is true for on-demand and streaming services: a study reviewing 50 episodes of the five highest-rated series on Netflix and Amazon Prime found 94% of episodes contained alcohol.[27]

"Alcohol is promoted in TV shows, movies. It's everywhere! It needs to be restricted." Jessica

Digital marketing

Online advertising is the fastest growing advertising medium in the UK, with expenditure being double that of TV advertising.[28]

Digital technologies have created new opportunities for brand marketing, including the ability to target specific audiences, spread content virally, create real-time and topical connections and engage users in the marketing process by allowing a two-way interaction between consumers and brands. On social media platforms and apps, marketing blends into games or features popular influencers and vloggers seemingly endorsing various alcohol brands.[29]

Especially on social media, the lines between commercial marketing content and user interactions become increasingly blurred. As users like, comment and share brand messages, they in effect become co-creators and distributors of alcohol marketing. Such content enhances the credibility of the marketing message through peer endorsement and often falls beyond brand-controlled spaces defined in

A sample of 112 episodes of popular TV shows delivered 4.9 billion alcohol impressions to the UK population

regulation.[30] This is particularly worrying, as age-gating processes, designed to prevent exposure to children under-18, can often be easily circumvented and are thus largely ineffective.[31]

A recent analysis showed that the top 100 most popular videos on TikTok using the hashtag '#alcohol' had almost 300 million combined views. Almost all of them (98%) contained positive portrayals of alcohol. With over a third of TikTok users being under 18, this raises concerns about the potential exposure of underage users to positive messages about alcohol.[32]

Sports and events sponsorship

Alcohol companies also advertise their brands and products through sponsorship of sports and other events. It has been suggested that brand promotion during events might be more effective than regular advertising due to a strong emotional and cognitive engagement of the viewer.[33]

Sports sponsorship, for example, allows brands to capitalise on our love of sport and emotional connections to our teams and players. It creates associations of alcohol brands with healthy activity and high-performing athletes – and thereby increases the brand's visibility, appeal and power among target consumers.[34]

The alcohol industry accounts for 20% of all sports sponsorship agreements worldwide.[35] Carlsberg sponsored the England football team from 1986 until 2018, Budweiser currently sponsor the Premier League, and Team GB were sponsored by Strongbow for the 2016 Olympic Games. The European Championship 2021, UEFA Europa League and Formula 1 are sponsored by Heineken. In 2019, Guinness signed a six-year sponsorship deal for the Six Nations Rugby Championship which was reportedly worth £6m in the first year, raising to almost double for the final year in 2024.[36] Guinness has also been an official beer partner of England Rugby since 2013.

The sponsorship reaches from static advertising on stadium structures to pitch side advertising boards to logos on player's shirts, balls, goal posts and the centre of the pitch. Moreover, press conferences and interviews are held in front of a banner showing logos of all sponsors, while bottles of alcohol are often placed in front of

players and coaches, effectively turning the stars into 'walking adverts' while they give their interviews. Sponsorship is further used to enhance the prominence and reach of other marketing, such as competitions, viral videos, limited edition products, merchandise and free giveaways, as well as adverts featuring the stars.

In particular, international tournaments and matches provide alcohol brands with a high-profile platform for broadcast advertising. For example, the televised broadcast of the 2016 European Football Championships reached more than 300 million views across 230 territories. Research has shown that there were more than 100 alcohol marketing references per broadcast during the 2016 Euros.[37] In the UK, the most watched programme from January – July 2021, was the Euros 2020 England versus Italy final, with a combined audience of over 22 million.[38]

Similarly, the Rugby Six Nations Championship is currently broadcast in more than 180 countries worldwide, reaching a combined audience of over 125 million. During the live Six Nations rugby union match between Scotland and England in 2020, there was an alcohol reference every 12 seconds.[39]

"Watching the Euros this summer, and the amazing performance of the England Team, was a highlight for the whole country. But it was so upsetting to see alcohol brands plastered all over the tournament – sponsoring the matches, in the press conferences, and in every ad break. All of those children looking up to the amazing role models - Rashford, Saka, Sterling, so many - just saw their heroes surrounded by alcohol. Heartbreaking."
Lucy

Similarly, alcohol companies often sponsor cultural events or festivals. It is estimated that alcohol brands spend more than US $1.54 billion annually on sponsorship of music festivals.[40] In the UK, Carlsberg is the official beer and Somersby (owned by Carlsberg) the official cider of the Live Nation festivals, which includes Reading, Leeds, Download, Creamfields, Virgin V Festivals and Latitude.[41]

Brands sponsoring festivals usually have exclusive beverage rights and their brand features all over the festival area. Moreover, they often operate their own branded attractions and unique experiences to give festival goers additional fun, and heavily promote the event (and thus their brand) before and after the actual event on social media. In addition, festival goers will post their own photos, often with the sponsors branding in the background.

A survey for a festival support service has found that 93% of festival goes liked the brands that sponsored the events; 80% were more likely to buy a product after engaging with them at a music festival; and 37% believed they had a better overall perception of the brand after the experience.[42]

The Marketing Director of Glen's Platinum Vodka explained the company's decision to sponsor three major UK festivals in 2017: *"our Glen's Original Vodka is currently the biggest selling spirit in Scotland and the second biggest in the UK. We want to bring Glen's Platinum to a similar market-leading position and music festivals are one of the most effective ways for drinks brands to engage with audiences, especially those in our target demographic of 25-to-34-year-olds."*[43]

Moving beyond sports and events sponsorship, Heineken has been a partner of the James Bond franchise since 1997. This deal includes images of 007 on Heineken bottles and boxes, TV commercials, product placement in the films, access for fans to unseen movie content and more.

Alcohol companies have increasingly started to use their non-alcoholic brands for sponsorship of sports and events. For example, it is Heineken 0.0 that sponsored the most recent European Championship, Formula 1 and the most recent James Bond movie. However, the non-alcoholic and full-strength products often feature the same branding, thus making the non-alcoholic product an alibi to market the overall brand.[44]

Alibi marketing

'Alibi marketing' emerged in the 1990s to promote tobacco products within markets where advertising was restricted.

It distills a brand identity into its key components, such as colours, typeface or phrases from the brand slogan, and uses these in place of the actual name or logo.

During the 2016 Euros, for example, sponsor Carlsberg responded to marketing restrictions in France by replacing the name with its advertising slogan 'Probably the best in the world'. This seemed to be effective – a similar proportion of people could recall Carlsberg as one of the main sponsors of the tournament as any of the sponsors who were able to explicitly promote their brands.[12] Likewise, Guinness used the term 'Greatness' for marketing during the 2020 Six Nations rugby matches played in France.[13]

Seasonal marketing and product tie-ins

"It has impacted every facet of life in the UK. No celebration takes place without alcohol being involved. As marketing campaigns go, it is probably the most successful of all time." Xan

Holidays, such as Christmas or Easter have long been used by brands to promote alcohol, but this has been expanded to just about any occasion. Summer means it's time for cocktails in the sun or a beer at a BBQ; winter is the time for mulled wine by a fire; Halloween is now associated with getting dressed up and going out drinking.

"I would not usually buy Barcardi. However, I saw advertising for the new Halloween 'Glow in the Dark' bottles in a magazine which intrigued me. So when I saw them at my local supermarket, I had to buy one." Sarah

Alcohol brands are also very adept at responding to current affairs and aligning themselves with social movements. For example, vodka has become 'the drink of Pride', with Smirnoff, Absolut and other vodka brands sponsoring events and producing special 'Pride' bottles.

Alcohol brands have also been quick to capitalise on the COVID-19 pandemic, related lockdowns and subsequent easings of restrictions. This ranged from providing games and challenges such as a WKD lockdown bingo or a Frosty Jack's word search to posts about cocktail making skills, social distancing, and celebrations once lockdown restrictions were lifted, to CSR messages about providing branded hand sanitiser.

Don't pink my drink – gendered alcohol marketing

Alcohol marketing has always been gendered. Historically, alcohol marketing has been targeted at men, which has at times included objectifying and sexualising women in adverts to sell alcohol to men. In recent years, alcohol brands have increasingly started to align themselves with female empowerment, friendship, feminism and motherhood.[14] This has seen the rise of pink products, sweet flavours, low-calorie options and concepts such as 'mummy juice' and 'wine o'clock'.

Alcohol companies have also taken advantage of women-related holidays and awareness days to promote their brands, such as Mother's Day, Valentine's Day and International Women's Day. For the latter, Johnnie Walker turned its mascot into Jane Walker and BrewDog repackaged it's Punk IPA as Pink IPA 'Beer for Girls'. Smirnoff has been running an 'Equalising Music' campaign for several years to increase women's representation in the music industry.

The marketing extends far beyond the actual drink products. We can now find anything from gin-flavoured pancake syrup to 'Press for Prosecco' bells to cushions, mugs, tea towels, posters and even sportswear celebrating 'gin-dependent women'.

“Alcohol marketing at Christmas contributed to my relapse” – Susan’s story

“The fact that I am proof personified of the subliminal power of alcohol advertising at Christmas is not something of which I am particularly proud. My experience is a cautionary tale about how even the most determined of us can have our resolve weakened by the seductive messages and images we are bombarded with during the festive period.

This is the season when the adverts for alcohol are relentless. They convince us that alcohol is an essential part of the festivities and sell us a cosy Christmas card fireside scene, wine glasses and champagne flutes in hand. Supermarkets also push discounted alcohol and will have offers on alcohol that are designed to make us buy more and more drink. Trying to maintain sobriety is difficult at the best of times, but at Christmas alcohol is absolutely everywhere, and this can have devastating consequences – as it did for me.

I was fresh out of my second rehab, attending twelve step meetings as I had been advised to do. I knew that to pick up a drink again would be catastrophic for me. It was also the run-up to Christmas, and the alluring images in adverts on the TV and magazines confirmed that the only way to have fun at Christmas was to drink, and this made me wistful at first and then resentful that I was missing out.

So, there I was, knowing that to drink would mean risking losing the people I loved and destroying the life I was trying to rebuild – but alcohol and the advertisers won. I relapsed on a massive scale. There was no cosy Christmas, smiling faces around Christmas dinner or snuggling up to watch festive films that year. Imagine the power that alcohol advertising must have, if it had such an impact on someone like me who had been so determined to change.”

Why is alcohol marketing a problem?

Alcohol marketing directly influences alcohol consumption. It normalises alcohol and helps create a culture where alcohol is seen as an essential part of everyday life.[15]

"Advertising has 100% affected myself and others around me, this is what advertising is designed for. Alcohol is marketed everywhere as sexy, cool, mysterious, hip, fun, the only way to enjoy yourself, even healthy. It's promoted on billboards, television, in cinemas, magazines, supermarkets, newspapers, football matches, in fact absolutely everywhere." Anonymous

We wanted to find out more about people's experience of alcohol marketing and conducted a short survey to find out more. Many respondents said that it "*leads to [thinking] that alcohol is wonderful*", "*encourages thinking that alcohol must be essential*" and "*tempts people to buy it*". Several people emphasised that it "*glamourises drinking [by] only showing fun parties [but] doesn't give any indication of the after-effects*" and "*never shows any consequences*".

Many survey-takers said "*alcohol marketing is everywhere*". Gillian elaborated: "*press, magazines, online, even as product placement in movies. Coming up to Christmas in particular, we will see relentless reference to special offers and deals to make alcohol even cheaper without referencing the harm it causes. The comparison with cigarette advertising is stark*".

People also highlighted that alcohol marketing can lead to pressure to drink in order to be fully accepted in social situations:

"Alcohol advertisements push the narrative that one can't have fun in a social setting without it, especially among young people. It was terrifying going to university, knowing that I don't like to drink, but at the same time thinking that that was the only way I would be fully accepted into social spaces." Anonymous

"Alcohol (and tobacco) marketing used to make me feel as if drinking (and smoking) were necessary to be part of society – I ... always thought I would grow up as someone who would drink as it was shown EVERYWHERE as the social thing to do." Jane

"Normalising drinking as a mechanism for socialising has impacted my friends and increased social pressure to drink." Anonymous

Others highlighted that marketing messages are effective at encouraging people to buy alcoholic products:

"I saw adverts and wanted to try the alcohol advertised. I soon became dependent on alcohol and it affected my life in a negative way. It was hard to stop drinking but with help I eventually managed to say no to alcohol." Denise

"It always made me think that there was a better time waiting for me if I held a glass containing an alcoholic drink." Ian

"It caused my husband to drink more than he otherwise would have. It reduced our income and eventually made him unwell." Mary

"When I was going through a long period of drinking too much, seeing alcohol adverts on TV just prompted me to buy more." Anonymous

"It made my drunken father more likely to go out and buy it, he was susceptible to advertising and TV images." Anonymous

"Makes me want a drink." Anonymous

"I see people drinking certain brands of alcohol widely advertised which taste foul and leave you feeling unwell even with small amounts. The power of advertising is significant." Keith

While alcohol marketing impacts most people in some ways, there are certain groups that are particularly vulnerable to it, including children and young people, as well as people in recovery and those trying to cut down their alcohol consumption.

Impact on children and young people

"It makes drinking look "cool" for young people." Diana

As alcohol is an age-restricted, health-harming product, it has been recognised that children and young people should be protected from exposure to alcohol marketing.

There is substantial evidence that exposure to alcohol marketing leads to children starting to drink earlier and drink more than they otherwise would.[16] Earlier age of drinking onset is associated with an increased likelihood of higher risk drinking or alcohol dependence in adolescence and adulthood, and also with dependence at a younger age.[17]

The UK Government recognises this and has stated that they *"are committed to ensuring that children and young people are suitably protected from irresponsible promotions, advertising and marketing of alcohol."*[18] The Scottish Government has also recognised that *"there is a compelling case for taking an approach to alcohol marketing which protects children"* and has committed to consulting on restrictions in 2022.[19]

82% of 11-17-year-olds have seen alcohol advertising in the last month

The current self-regulatory advertising codes contain rules that prohibit the targeting of alcohol marketing to under-18s by using content that is 'particularly' appealing to children, or through the selection of media or context in which the advert appears.

However, evidence shows that this approach fails to prevent children's exposure to large amounts of alcohol marketing. Children and young people are not only aware of various alcohol brands but also find marketing messages appealing – which in turn influences their perception of alcohol and makes it more likely they will start drinking.

Children are exposed to alcohol marketing

Evidence clearly shows that children are regularly exposed to alcohol marketing and demonstrate high levels of brand awareness. A nationally representative cross-sectional survey funded by Cancer Research UK found that four in five (82%) 11-17-year-olds in the UK had seen alcohol marketing in the past month.[20]

Exposure to alcohol advertising was highest on TV: 59% of 11-17-year-olds reported seeing alcohol adverts on TV in the last month. This was a higher percentage that the number reporting seeing famous people in films, music videos, on TV or pictured in magazines (56%).[21]

Exposure was also high on catch-up and streaming services, with a third (34%) of young people seeing alcohol at least monthly.[22] The most common types of shows with alcohol adverts were sports, entertainment and reality TV. Most concerningly, 2% of 11–17-year-olds said they had seen alcohol adverts on children's TV, which is prohibited under the broadcast code.[23]

Alcohol marketing does not only reach young people on TV, but also online: 42% of young people had seen alcohol adverts on social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram or others in the past month.[24] Moreover, approximately a fifth (19%) had interacted with alcohol marketing online in the past month.[25]

Almost half (49%) of underage adolescents had further seen alcohol advertising on billboards in the street in the last month.[26]

Sport sponsorship is a key source of exposure to alcohol marketing, both on TV and in real life: almost half (49%) of 11-17-year-olds recalled seeing alcohol sponsorship for sports or events at least monthly, while three in ten (29%) recalled seeing it at least weekly.[27] Such figures cause concern in light of evidence that sports sponsorship has been linked to alcohol consumption amongst school children.[28]

In addition, 15% reported owning merchandise, such as clothing or drinks glasses that show an alcoholic drink brand or logo, effectively creating child alcohol brand ambassadors.[29] This is particularly concerning as more engaging marketing, such as owning merchandise and downloading screen savers, were found to be stronger predictors of drinking among young people than simply being aware of alcohol marketing.[30]

Alcohol marketing appeals to children

Research further shows that alcohol marketing is effective in reaching children and that it appeals to them. It increases their awareness of alcohol brands and influences their perception of alcohol. Ensuring early brand recognition is seen to be particularly important by alcohol marketers in the drive to establish brand loyalty.[31]

Despite the existing codes, many brands have established themselves successfully with children: for example, almost seven in ten (68%) 11-17-year-olds are aware of the brand Guinness. This is not an exception; the majority of young people are also familiar with brands such as Budweiser (65%), Jack Daniels (59%), Fosters (58%), Smirnoff (55%), Carlsberg (54%), Carling (51%) and WKD (51%).[32]

Worryingly, it is not just those closest to the legal drinking age that recognise the brands: even among the youngest participants, aged 11-12, the majority (52%) still recognised Guinness.[33]

One child explained how much impact alcohol marketing can have:

"[It is] quite subconscious the way you take it in, because I personally wouldn't pay much attention to the adverts but ... I could probably name off half the alcohol brands that are on the TV ... So yes, you take it in even if you think you are not paying attention and stuff ... it will still be engrained in you in some way".[34]

Significant exposure to sports sponsorship means that children are able to identify, reference and describe the brands and logos of sponsoring alcohol companies. A member of the Scottish Children's Parliament (age 9-11) said: *"the Champions League sponsor is Heineken. The logo is green and black. At the start of the match, they announce the sponsor and you can see the adverts all over the stadium."*[35]

Not only are children exposed to alcohol marketing, they also find marketing messages appealing – despite the advertising codes stating alcohol marketing may not use content that is 'particularly' appealing to children.

Research found that half of 11-17-year-olds surveyed reacted positively to TV adverts for Fosters and Smirnoff brands (53% and 52% respectively), and a third reacted positively to an advert featuring the Haig Club brand (34%).[36] Their reaction also influenced their attitudes: among young people who had never drunk alcohol, those who had positive reactions to the adverts were around one and a half times more likely to report being susceptible to drink in the next year.[37]

52% of 11-12-year-olds recognise the brand Guinness

The repeated exposure to positive messages about drinking in alcohol marketing leads children to develop positive expectancies about drinking alcohol. They progressively internalise marketing messages and eventually employ them in decisions about whether to drink or not.[38]

It is clear that self-regulatory codes are failing to protect children from alcohol advertisement. Despite assurances to the contrary, children are:

> regularly exposed to alcohol marketing;

> aware of various alcohol brands, and able to describe logos and colours;

> find marketing messages appealing.

Given the clear evidence that exposure to alcohol marketing impacts children's alcohol consumption, it is time for Government to take action and implement policies which will effectively protect children and young people.

Impact on people in recovery

Most research on the impact of alcohol marketing is about young people and much less evidence is available on how alcohol marketing influences adults.[39] However, alcohol marketing has been identified as problematic for vulnerable groups, such as those in recovery. Marketing can cue the desire for alcohol and can be a 'trigger' for relapse.[40]

In our survey, people in recovery have highlighted the role alcohol marketing plays and how it can make it more difficult to stay sober:

"I found it difficult seeing alcohol advertised everywhere: bus stops, TV, newspapers. Even now – I am in recovery and have been sober two and a half years – I find it triggering still. Tobacco adverts aren't a thing anymore and nor should this. People with alcohol addiction aren't given a fighting chance." Millie

"Before I stopped drinking alcohol on 1 January 2021, TV advertising would encourage me to open a bottle of wine." Emma

"It triggers my alcoholism." Anonymous

"As a long time user of alcohol, I find the advertising of drink very unhelpful. Advertising should be treated the same as tobacco and banned." Derek

The impact of alcohol marketing on people in recovery has also been described by those around them:

"My brother is has alcohol dependency and struggling for years to beat it. Every corner he turns when he's out or watching TV an advert will pop up making alcohol look an attractive way of life ... forgetting about those who are suffering and their close friends and family." Miesah

"I am a therapist specialising in alcohol dependence that blights women. My clients are deeply impacted by advertising, wine and gin especially, which are marketed strategically at the wine o'clock tribe. Teatime, and between regular TV programmes before 9pm." Sarah

"Alcohol advertising did not help my partner when trying to recover from an alcohol addiction. I believe that having stricter advertising rules, such as those on tobacco products, would make a small difference to the problem." Lucie

"I worked as a detox nurse for 20 years, all my patients struggled with alcohol adverts when trying to control or abstain from drinking." Fiona

A recent study into the role the environment plays in recovery from alcohol dependence has confirmed that the persistent availability and marketing of alcohol was one of the largest risks.[41] One participant, who had been sober for three years, noted that he could see the local shop from his window, saying *"it's just there right on my doorstep and the first sign is beers and ciders."*[42]

Participants of the same study also noted the difficulty of going shopping. They emphasised the need to avoid small corner shops where alcohol was right at the front, as well as the alcohol aisle in bigger supermarkets:

"Wherever I have to go past these shops ... I don't go in for milk or paper or anything like that anymore ... alcohol is right at the counter ... it's a trigger for me, so I have to avoid it. I don't go there. If I haven't got milk, I have to wait until I go to the [big] shops. And I choose not to go down the alcohol aisles in Asda or wherever."[43]

Alcohol marketing can also act as a trigger for people who have been harmed by alcohol:

"My early years were ruined by the impact alcohol had on adults that should have been caring for me, so seeing alcohol being marketed everywhere all the time makes my blood boil. It is immensely triggering." Elizabeth

"I have been the victim of alcohol abuse and never wish to see it advertised as healthy or a normal part of life." Faith

Marketing, recovery and me – Melissa's story

"In early recovery it dawned on me quickly that I had to get used to alcohol being everywhere and it was a major struggle. If I tried to avoid alcohol, I would never leave the house or turn on a TV.

There really is no escape from alcohol imagery. Waiting for the tube at 8am, I look at a 6-foot bottle of whisky. The side of a bus tells me there is an app that can get me 'booze in under 15 minutes'. Some of my favourite TV shows are sponsored by alcohol. I receive emails from supermarkets telling me how they have slashed their prices of spirits. When I go to a supermarket, alcohol offers are dotted around the whole shop. I have no way to opt out of any of this. I am expected to accept this.

Huge restrictions are in place on the marketing of tobacco and now there is a clamp down on gambling adverts. But what of alcohol? For me, I feel it's just being promoted more and more. For whatever reason, as a society alcohol is forced upon us, we do not have a choice. I am not a prohibitionist but this overexposure to a substance that causes so much harm is completely irresponsible."

“You don’t see it until you stop drinking” – Nikki’s story

“My name is Nikki and have been sober for just over 14 months.

During the very early days of sobriety, alcohol seemed to be everywhere – on the TV, in magazines, and promoted heavily at the supermarket. I remember going out of my way to avoid the alcohol aisle but still found alcohol offers available alongside the meat and cheese! As I walked round the supermarket, Christmas baubles filled with gin, alcohol advent calendars and alcohol-themed Christmas presents were simply unavoidable – I couldn’t get away.

I had never really noticed the fact that alcohol is everywhere until I stopped drinking. You turn the TV on to a show like *This Morning* or *Saturday Kitchen*, and the presenters are tasting new alcoholic drinks at 10 o’clock in the morning – how is this allowed?

The adverts make out that drinking will improve your life and is something needed to have fun. Of course, the marketing never shows anything about the darker side of drinking. Never do adverts say you can end up drunk, addicted, vomiting bile, arguing with friends and family, driving over the limit, snapping at your children or getting them into bed earlier than normal so you can drink after that stressful day at work. Shouldn’t we be hearing more about these sorts of risks?

Every day, the adverts and messages come through to us, via sports, movies, adverts, music, the list is endless. You can’t advertise mamba or cocaine, but you can advertise alcohol. Tobacco is legal but it can’t be advertised any more. Why is this not the same with alcohol?”

What can be done?

As outlined above, the current self-regulatory alcohol marketing codes are clearly not effective to protect children and vulnerable adults. Despite codes prohibiting the targeting of under-18s, children are regularly exposed to alcohol marketing, are aware of various brands and find marketing messages appealing.

The public agrees that alcohol marketing often appeals to children: one in three people who were shown TV alcohol adverts felt that the material breached the code regarding appeal to those under 18 or showing juvenile or adolescent behaviour.[44]

Respondents to our survey further stated:

"As an Emergency Department doctor, I regularly have to look after drunk teenagers. Much alcohol is now deliberately marketed at teenagers with bright colours."
Adrian

"It targets my children by portraying alcohol as fun. They want to drink it."
Anonymous

The inadequacy of the current self-regulatory approach has been confirmed by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, formerly Public Health England: *"a consistent body of research demonstrates considerable violations of content guidelines within self-regulated alcohol marketing codes, suggesting that the self-regulatory systems that govern alcohol marketing practices are not meeting their intended goal of protecting vulnerable populations."*[45]

Furthermore, the Advertising Standards Authority highlighted that there is *"very concerning"* potential for children to be exposed to alcohol marketing in online spaces, despite supposed industry self-regulation. They concluded that *"alcohol campaigns appear to be falling short in minimising the possibility of children [...] being exposed to paid-for alcohol ads through their social media accounts"*.[46]

Are you a pirate? An example of poor industry self-regulation

One of the key regulators of alcohol marketing, the Portman Group, is an entirely industry-funded body that has faced criticism for some of its decisions. One such decision, as reported by Alcohol Change UK, involved a complaint against the brand Captain Morgan, which is owned by Diageo, a key member of the Portman Group. The complaint was that the eponymous Captain Morgan was a pirate, and thus appealed to children and young people. The Portman Group concluded, in agreement with Diageo, that Captain Morgan was "not a pirate". Captain Morgan himself would have found this surprising as he, to quote Diageo in a subsequent unrelated copyright case, wears a "pirate's hat" and a "nautical or pirate's uniform" and is regularly wheeled out for social media events such as "Talk Like a Pirate Day".[47]

The World Health Organization recommends restricting alcohol marketing as one of the most effective policies to reduce alcohol harm. While comprehensive bans are the most effective, a good place to start to reduce children and vulnerable adults' exposure to alcohol marketing is to introduce restrictions on alcohol advertising on TV, on-demand services and online alcohol advertising – policies the UK Government is currently proposing for junk food.

The advertising of tobacco has been severely restricted since the early 2000s and the current Health and Care Bill aims to extend advertising restrictions to unhealthy foods. Yet alcohol, which is a harmful and addictive product, is exempt. Excluding alcohol from the proposed restrictions is a missed opportunity to protect children and vulnerable people from alcohol advertising.

To reduce alcohol harm and protect children and vulnerable people, the UK Government needs to introduce restrictions on alcohol marketing. In the short term, alcohol should be included in the restrictions proposed for 'unhealthy food and drink' in the Health and Care Bill. In the longer term, more comprehensive restrictions should be introduced to limit exposure to alcohol marketing, in line with WHO recommendations.

Restrictions on alcohol marketing already exist in other countries, including France, Estonia, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Russia, Sweden and Switzerland.[48] In 2015, Finland became the first country to restrict alcohol marketing on social media.[49] In 2018, Ireland passed the Public Health (Alcohol) Act which includes a wide range of policies to restrict alcohol marketing, including a 9pm broadcast watershed, banning advertising on public transport and at stations, and prohibiting alcohol advertising on the grounds of sporting events and at events aimed mostly at children.

Alongside Ireland, France and Norway also restrict alcohol marketing in relation to sport. In the UK, Scottish Women's Football now refuses alcohol sponsorship, viewing it as incompatible with their goal of promoting a healthy lifestyle.[50]

The Health and Care Bill 2021

The Health and Care Bill was introduced by the UK Government in summer 2021. It is the biggest piece of health legislation in almost a decade but it hardly mentions alcohol.

The Bill will introduce restrictions on the advertising of 'less healthy food and drink', including a 9pm watershed on TV and on-demand services, and a prohibition of online advertising. However, the definition of 'less healthy food or drink' does not include alcoholic beverages. This is despite the fact that alcohol is the leading risk factor for death, ill-health and disability among 15-49-year-olds.

The Bill provides a great opportunity to help protect children and vulnerable people by extending the proposed advertising restrictions to alcohol.

The public strongly supports introducing more restrictions on alcohol marketing: more than three-quarters (77%) of people back controls to help protect children from alcohol advertising. 70% support stopping alcohol adverts from being shown on TV before 9pm.[51]

When we asked people whether and why they think alcohol marketing should be restricted, many highlighted that "*alcohol should be viewed in a similar light to smoking*", and that "*we need to shift the way it is glamourised in order to improve and save lives*".

Other people agreed:

"Any dangerous product that is bad for health and connected to crime and violence should of course be restricted." Elizabeth

"It's everywhere in everyone's faces daily ... Would they do the same with cigarettes? No, they stopped them because it kills you." Lauren

"It shouldn't be allowed to be a sponsor for anything. It should have the same restrictions as cigarettes do now." Anonymous

"Alcohol advertisements push the false narrative that alcohol is always something fun and that it's something needed in social settings. Banning tobacco advertisements has proven not only that 'Out of sight, out of mind' works, but also that not allowing unhealthy products such as alcohol or tobacco to be glamorised helps shift the societal norms around their consumption. In the UK it is incredibly difficult to go about physical or social media spaces without running into alcohol advertisements. How are problematic drinkers expected to recover in settings where they cannot go without being reminded of how exhilarating alcohol consumption is?" Anonymous

77% of people back controls to help protect children from alcohol advertising

"I think it should be banned completely ... Imagine how a child of a violent alcoholic father feels when they see an ad for alcohol." Judith

Children themselves are demanding change. For example, one child stated: *"I want it out of my face".*[52] 67% of 11-18-year-olds support controls to limit the exposure of children and young people to alcohol advertising, and 59% support a 9pm TV watershed.[53]

Investigators of the Scottish Children's Parliament (age 9-11) wanted alcohol to be less visible in children's lives and suggested that adverts should not be allowed to be displayed where children may see them, including on TV and online.[54] Similarly, the Young Scot Heath Panel (age 14-25) recommended the introduction of a watershed for alcohol advertising on television, and only allowing alcohol advertising before films that have an 18 certificate.[55]

It's time for Government to act

As outlined in this report, alcohol and alcohol marketing are all around us – in our streets, on public transport, in shops, on TV, on the internet, during sports and at events.

Alcohol companies employ modern marketing strategies and create impactful marketing campaigns making use of current events. Seasonal marketing is abundant especially around Christmas, but also on other holidays and awareness days.

This omnipresent nature of alcohol marketing helps to normalise alcohol and portrays it as something 'cool' and 'fun' that is 'necessary to have a good time'. It directly influences consumption of alcohol, including that amongst children and vulnerable adults.

As alcohol is an age-restricted product, regulations exist to protect children from being targeted by alcohol marketing. However, this is based on a complex system of self and co-regulation, with different industry-developed codes applying in different contexts and overseen by different bodies. This leads to a system which is inconsistent, ineffective and fails to stop children and vulnerable people being exposed to alcohol marketing.

Children and young people are exposed to substantial amounts of alcohol marketing, especially on TV. Four in five 11-17-year-olds report seeing alcohol marketing in the past month, while more than a fifth recall seeing alcohol ads on TV at least 3-4 times a week.[56] Almost a fifth of 11-17-year-olds have actively participated with alcohol marketing online in the past month.[57]

This marketing is effective in reaching children, building brand awareness and influencing their perception of alcohol. The majority of 11-17-year-olds are aware of various alcohol brands, including Guinness, Budweiser, Jack Daniels, Fosters, Smirnoff and others.[58] Similarly, children as young as nine years can identify alcohol brands that sponsor sporting events and accurately describe the logo and brand colours.[59]

The repeated exposure to alcohol marketing messages leads to children and young people internalising marketing messages and developing positive expectancies about drinking. As a consequence, children and young people exposed to alcohol marketing start to drink earlier or drink more than they otherwise would.[60]

The pervasiveness of alcohol marketing has also been identified as a main risk for people in recovery.[61] In our survey, people in recovery have highlighted how alcohol advertising can heighten cravings for alcohol and can even lead to relapse. Seasonal advertising around Christmas has been highlighted as particularly difficult.

It is clear that the existing codes and regulations for alcohol marketing are failing to protect children and vulnerable people. It is time for Government to take action.

The World Health Organization recommends comprehensive bans on alcohol marketing as one of the most effective policies to reduce alcohol harm. Advertising for tobacco has already been severely restricted in the UK since the early 2000s and the UK

Government is currently proposing to extend marketing restrictions to 'less healthy foods and drinks'. However, alcohol, which is a harmful and addictive product, is exempt from the proposals. Given the evidence of the harmful impact of alcohol marketing and the ineffectiveness of current regulations, there is a real opportunity to improve the health of our nation by extending these provisions to alcohol.

Recommendations

The UK Government needs to introduce restrictions on alcohol marketing to protect children and vulnerable people.

- In the short term, alcohol should be included in the restrictions proposed for 'unhealthy food and drink' in the Health and Care Bill, including a 9pm watershed on TV and on-demand services, as well as a complete online ban.
- In the longer term, the UK Government should introduce more comprehensive restrictions to limit exposure to alcohol marketing, in line with WHO recommendations.

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