

“Alcohol marketing to LGBTQ+ people: Evolving strategies to target identity”

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**SHAAP/SARN ‘Alcohol Occasional’ Seminar
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Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems ([SHAAP](http://www.shaap.org.uk)) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network ([SARN](http://www.sarn.ac.uk)) are proud to host our Alcohol Occasionals seminar series, which showcases new and innovative research on alcohol. These events provide the chance for researchers, healthcare professionals, policy makers, and members of the public to hear about alcohol-related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The theme for 2023 is ‘Alcohol in a changing world’. Our [event reports](#) aim to capture the main discussion points and communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is responsible for the contents of this report, which is our interpretation.

Introduction

There were no Conflicts of Interest to declare. The project was funded by the Institute of Alcohol Studies small grants scheme.

Alcohol health inequalities and the LGBTQ+ community

The negative health and societal impacts of alcohol are well-documented, but these harms are not shared equally amongst the population. The report looks at the disparity in harms, specifically the health inequality affecting those that are part of the LGBTQ+ community. It is established that sexual and gender minorities have higher rates of

alcohol use, and are at higher risk of alcohol related harms. It is also noted that the picture is more complicated than this and some of the nuances of the issues are lost by grouping all sexual and gender minorities together. There is, for example, some evidence suggesting greater differences in alcohol use between sexual minority women and heterosexual women than between sexual minority men and heterosexual men. Further, those who identify as bisexual are more likely to have severe AUD than those reporting exclusive same-sex behaviour. Finally, whilst there has been limited research with regard to transgender individuals, evidence does suggest higher prevalence of binge-drinking when compared to cisgender counterparts.

Why does this health disparity exist?

There has been a body of work exploring this topic. Some possible explanations include:

- 1 Minority stress theory: Alcohol can be used to deal with stresses with regard to discrimination (i.e. used as a coping mechanism).
- 2 The normalisation of alcohol in LGBTQ+ environments: perception of community drinking norms drive consumption.
- 3 Use of alcohol as part of identity construction.



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Alcohol marketing and alcohol use

The impact of marketing on increased alcohol consumption and hazardous drinking is well-established. Everyone will be exposed to some level of alcohol marketing, but by targeting specific groups, the negative effects may be increased.

The scoping review: How do alcohol companies target gender and sexually diverse communities?

Definitions and approach

The population of interest was identified as individuals who identify as Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGMs), including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.

For the purposes of the review, publications that focused solely on

cisgender/heterosexual participants were excluded, as were those without separate discussion of data from SGM individuals.

Alcohol marketing is defined as industry activity designed to engender either tangible or intangible benefits of the product to the consumer in order to generate sales.

Publications that conflated marketing of alcohol and other substances, with no separate discussion of alcohol-specific data were excluded.

A variety of sources were included (quantitative and qualitative studies, case reports, peer-reviewed editorials/scholarly writing, book chapters, preprints, reports and theses). In total 14 articles were included from 1994-2022.

Key themes identified:

1. Moving with the times
2. Exploiting the Scene/seen
3. Performing solidarity

1. Moving with the times

In socially progressive countries, increased awareness and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity has led to commercial ambition to harness the 'pink pound'.

Note that this is not the case everywhere in the world, hence the findings of the report are limited to socially progressive countries. In fact, all reports in the review come from either New-Zealand, Scotland or the US.

Historically, print media has been important. Alcohol advertising has appeared in both local and national lesbian and gay publications. 'The Advocate', for example, has accepted advertising from the alcohol industry targeted at the gay community since its inception. This trend has continued across other magazines. Accepting such advertising also has the effect, whether intentionally or not, of limiting the focus on alcohol harms in such magazines.

There are also examples of targeted

television advertising/ sponsorship (e.g. 'Queer as Folk' and 'RuPaul's Drag Race'). In the literature, however, there is limited discussion regarding the evolution of television marketing.

Whilst the digital age has ushered in new marketing methods, there was again limited discussion of overt marketing via social media. The research that exists focuses on brands using posts to celebrate pride or other LGBTQ+ campaigns (e.g. Smirnoff #chooselove campaign). User-generated marketing (i.e. social media influencers) is also used to normalise alcohol as part of everyday life. The success of such digital campaigns is not clear from the literature: indeed some feel that they are 'desensitised' to such forms of marketing.

2. Exploiting the Scene/ Seen

The literature focused on commercial venues, particularly those involving gay men. Drinks promotions/events with certain brands are common.

The literature also discussed sexualisation of staff to promote alcohol consumption in some venues.

There is a feeling that there is a restricted choice of LGBTQ+ venues that do not involve alcohol.

Visual advertisements using images of stereotypically attractive men were noted in the literature as ads designed to target gay men.

The rainbow flag has also been appropriated as a marketing tool and there is some evidence from testimonials suggesting that this may be effective as a tactic. Other such stereotypes/clichés are often used for marketing.

3. Performing Solidarity

Sponsorship of Pride events is emphasised in literature, and the saturation of such culturally important spaces with alcohol ads has the effect of normalising their use.

A broad range of events were identified as having alcohol sponsors. The lack of other funding breeds a reliance on the alcohol industry for the

continued success of such events.

This is complemented by industry patronage of LGBTQ+ charities (e.g. Absolut vodka and Stonewall). The literature reveals diverging narratives of such patronage: for some it is a positive sign of social change, whereas some view it as 'pink-washing'.

This performative solidarity is exemplified by Coors Brewing, who have sponsored Pride (amongst other events) whilst also funding a homophobic think-tank.

There are also examples of LGBTQ+ owned alcohol companies, (something not focused on in the literature). The support of such companies for LGBTQ+ causes is harder to dismiss as not being genuine.

It was also noted that the academic research is 'behind the curve' on this topic, and there has already been discussion amongst the LGBTQ+ community of such issues.

Link to tobacco marketing

It was pointed out that many of the marketing tools used by alcohol companies are very similar (if not identical) to those used in the past by the tobacco industry. Regulation of tobacco is ahead of that of alcohol, but lessons can be learnt from their previous marketing tactics.

What impact does this marketing have?

There has not been sufficient research to give any definitive answer. There exists only small amounts of anecdotal data, but research involving young people suggest that it is likely to have a significant effect.

Regulation

In the UK alcohol marketing is self-regulated via industry funded bodies. The practices discussed here 'fall through the cracks' of their codes of practice. Self-regulatory codes place responsibilities on individuals rather than the industry and perpetuate the growing health inequality.

Q&A and discussion

In the Q&A session there was discussion of whether other industries would fill alcohol's place should the influence of the alcohol industry be reduced. Dr Whiteley emphasised that the fact that alcohol is a harmful substance which perpetuates a health inequality is why it is so important to focus on its sponsorship in particular. There was also a brief discussion of the alcohol industry capitalising on other social issues, such as 'green-washing'. There was a question on whether research existed on the effectiveness of ads showing support for the LGBTQ+ community. It was discussed that the evidence that currently exists is anecdotal, but the fact that the alcohol industry keep using such ads suggests their effectiveness.

The reason for such lack of research was also questioned, and Dr Whiteley suggested that it is likely a funding issue. A question was then asked regarding views from within LGBTQ+ communities on such sponsorships and it was suggested that there is a 'growing annoyance'. Leading from this, the issue of a 'disconnect' was brought up, given that many LGBTQ+ events seem to continue to take on alcohol sponsors. Dr Whiteley explained that this was likely for pragmatic reasons, as many may see alcohol sponsorship as their only choice to have the events run.

Dr Whiteley was then asked if alcohol marketing was likely to move away from venue-based marketing as the number of LGBTQ+ bars decreases outside of metropolitan areas. It was pointed out that the alcohol industry is actively trying to prevent some of the closures of such venues. There was a brief discussion of 'no and low-alcohol' products, but it was recognised that this was not a topic discussed in the literature.

Dr Whiteley was then challenged as to whether there was evidence suggesting that alcohol sponsors are the only choice for LGBTQ+ events, or if that is a myth. Dr Whiteley responded that the literature

suggested as such, but that it raises a valid point, as it serves the alcohol industry to maintain the perception that they are the only choice of sponsor.

Watch this seminar

Watch the full event recording [here](#)

