

Alcohol Occasionals

Transforming Scotland's Relationship with Alcohol

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network (SARN) 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. 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.

Seminar 1:

A Match Made in Scotland - Exploring the Relationship between Alcohol and Football

Delivered by Dr Richard Purves on Wednesday 20th March 2024



Dr Richard Purves is a Senior Research Fellow based at the Institute for Social Marketing and Health (ISMH), University of Stirling. Richard has been at ISMH since 2010 and in that time has developed extensive experience in mixed-methods research in public health and marketing with a particular focus on alcohol marketing. Richard has a strong track record of research leadership and significant experience leading and working on research projects involving alcohol, tobacco, gambling and High Fat, Salt and Sugar (HFSS) foods. Richard is particularly interested in using innovative research methods to study behaviour in a naturalistic environment.

Dr Purves discussed the relationship between alcohol and football in Scotland by drawing on the findings of recent research projects including those on:

- Understanding of the role of alcohol in football cultures
- Alcohol sports sponsorship
- Alcohol availability at Scottish football grounds.

The seminar was structured to answer 3 key questions:

1. What is the current culture of alcohol consumption at football matches in Scotland?
2. How has this culture been created?
3. How can this culture be changed?

01. What is the current culture of alcohol consumption at football matches in Scotland?

Richard and colleagues were interested in understanding why and how people drink alcohol whilst watching football, the extent of harm caused, and how it compares to other leisure activities.

Results from the [Alcohol FC](#) study found that drinking alcohol is viewed as a normal activity by many football supporters. 60% of the football supporters in Scotland surveyed felt that drinking alcohol at football grounds was acceptable. Acceptance was particularly high amongst frequent match-goers. Almost half of those surveyed believed that the majority of those who attend football matches drank alcohol beforehand.

Drinking behaviours varied between team fan bases, affecting where and how alcohol was consumed before games.

02. How has the current culture been shaped?

In the 1970s and 80s, alcohol was not sold in Scottish football stadia, but fans could bring their own alcohol. Due to an increase in football-related disorder, including a violent mass pitch invasion at the 1980 Scottish Cup Final, an act of Parliament was passed which banned alcohol at all sporting grounds in Scotland.

Alcohol continues to be banned at football stadia in Scotland, with the exception of in hospitality areas. The ban was lifted for rugby grounds in 2007 and concerns have been raised by fans about this difference in regulation between the sports.

Results from the Photovoice Study found that football fans will maximise their opportunities to drink by buying alcohol on their way to matches, drinking in the queue for the pub, drinking whilst in the pub, and then consuming alcohol outside of the stadium grounds before the match.

Commercial influences on culture

Culture can also be shaped by marketing. Alcohol sports sponsorship has increased massively over the past 40 years. Scotland has a higher level of alcohol sports sponsorship than many countries across Europe: in 2019 and 2022, half of Scottish Premiership teams were sponsored by, or partnered with, an alcohol company. However, there are currently no statutory regulations on this form of marketing.

During a football match [studied by researchers](#), an alcohol reference appeared on screen every 71 seconds on average. Why is this important? It normalises that drinking is a behaviour which goes hand-in-hand with sport.

03. How can the culture change?

- Alcohol sponsorship is self-regulated by the alcohol industry. Currently, before sponsoring a team or event, alcohol companies must ensure that at least 75% of the viewing audience are adults over the age of 18. However, this still allows for 25% of any audience to be under 18, meaning that many young people are exposed to alcohol marketing.
- In 2023 the Scottish Government launched a consultation on potential future restrictions on alcohol marketing, including alcohol sports sponsorship. There has yet to be any changes announced as a result of the consultation.
- Young people in previous research recalled seeing marketing from the alcohol industry on a weekly basis, and were able to associate specific brands with sports sponsorship. Additionally, a systematic review of research studies found that there is a link between alcohol marketing and consumption. These results highlight the need for statutory regulation to protect children and young people from the impact of marketing.
- A current concern by public health actors is the use of alibi/ surrogate alcohol marketing. A [research study](#) looking at the EURO 2016 football tournament found that Carlsberg, who was one of main sponsors, used alibi marketing (which includes using company colours, fonts, and slogans) despite alcohol marketing being prohibited in France.
- Alcohol companies have also substituted some of the content of their marketing activities with the no or low alcohol variation of their alcohol products to bypass current regulation ([known as surrogate marketing](#)). For example, in the upcoming Olympics in Paris in 2024, Corona Zero will be a prominent sponsor.
- Future legislation in Scotland should aim to carefully address the gaps observed in regulation of other countries.
- In the [Alcohol FC study](#), a majority of fans surveyed agreed that alcohol should be available at football. However, a greater percentage of fans in England (90%) agreed than those in Scotland (64%). This suggests that legislation may play a role in how we perceive the acceptability of alcohol, as alcohol is available for general sale in English football stadia.
- There are public health concerns about allowing alcohol to be sold at football matches in Scotland. These concerns are related to:
 - **Alcohol availability** – the availability of alcohol is related to alcohol consumption and resulting alcohol-related harm.
 - **Alcohol marketing** – increased marketing and sponsorship will influence drinking, as well as attitudes and beliefs about drinking.
 - **Increased normalisation** – increased normalisation of alcohol as an ordinary commodity.

04. Conclusions

1. The culture of drinking whilst watching football is often based on socialising and achieving a 'buzz' before the match.
2. This culture has been influenced by current legislation and corporate influences which have helped to normalise the association between alcohol and sport
3. Policies aimed at restricting alcohol sponsorship could help reduce association.
4. Some stakeholders believe that changes to the availability of alcohol could affect safety, but other factors related to drinking and football-related violent disorder should also be taken into consideration.

05. Q&A and Discussion Session

Below is a summary of the questions asked by our audience members and answers provided by Dr Purves during the discussion section of the seminar. To hear the questions and answers in full, please view the video on our YouTube channel which is linked at the end of this document.

Did you find any contrasting narratives in your data?

There were contrasts in how and why fans drank alcohol. For example, some younger fans drank to get drunk by consuming high strength drinks, where others described more 'relaxed style of drinking' (lager or beer).

What were the experiences of women?

Findings suggest that women experience similar drinking cultures to men (however, men often referred to it as a 'man's culture').

Did you consider domestic abuse in your research?

There have been reports of increases in levels of domestic abuse following Celtic-Rangers matches, which was one of the reasons Police Scotland requested bringing the kick-off of the matches forward. However, although people do not have as much time to go to pubs before the game, preloading is still common from home or on buses to matches highlighting that closer attention should be paid to this.

Did any of the study participants speak about using cocaine alongside or instead of alcohol?

Safety officers interviewed as part of the Alcohol FC study spoke about this being a greater concern for them in terms of violence and disorder than alcohol, so has been something that the team have monitored since. One of the [published papers](#) explicitly talks about the link between alcohol and cocaine and how this has added to the 'carnavalesque' nature of behaviour at matches.

What is the justification for alcohol marketing? Are there concerns from clubs about what would replace alcohol sponsorship if removed in the future?

This is something that comes up often. Scottish football does not get the same amount of money from TV rights as other countries, so relies more heavily on sponsorship. However, we have seen this same debate in other sports, and in other industries. For example, when tobacco was removed from sports sponsorships, the tobacco industry argued that those sports would crumble, however this was not the case. Additionally, teams and leagues are still doing okay in other countries who have banned alcohol sponsorship. We have looked at how many sponsorships there are, but we do not have information on the value of the sponsorship.

Did you find anything about no- or low-alcohol drinks in your research?

At least one football club did have these drinks available in terms of a zero alcohol stand, but it was not particularly popular. It would be interesting to look at statistics in England for example, where these drinks may be available at games, and how the percentage purchases of these products compare to full strength alcohol products.

Did stakeholders speak about their competing roles in supporting fans whilst also bringing money in?

Clubs are keen to emphasize the work they do to support their local community. The clubs see the consumption of alcohol as having a role in people coming to see football, and as a normal product in society, so they are not coming from a public health perspective. So their priority is to sell alcohol in a "responsible" and "safe" way. When challenged on this from the perspective of keeping alcohol away from children and young people and limiting exposure, they feel that exposing them to a different type of alcohol consumption may be better in the long run.



Watch the seminar



View our events



View our publications



Contact SHAAP