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Young people’s views of alcohol sports sponsorship:

Insights from focus groups with young people in Scotland

Key Findings

**High brand awareness among young people**

Participants exhibited a strong awareness of alcohol brands, with children as young as eleven recognising the logos of various brands by name and identifying their products. They were also familiar with different marketing practices used to promote these products and reported frequent exposure to alcohol advertisements on TV, posters, billboards, and social media.

**Sports as a major source of sponsorship exposure**

Young people reported being frequently exposed to sponsorship and identified sports—particularly football and rugby—as the primary source of alcohol sponsorship exposure. Many expressed concerns that alcohol sponsorship in sports was inappropriate for young audiences, as it could encourage underage drinking and create positive associations between alcohol and athleticism. Alcohol brands sponsoring sporting events did ‘not make sense’ to them as many found it difficult to reconcile sporting events and athletes with unhealthy products such as alcohol because of their belief that sportspeople did not consume alcohol prior to or whilst competing. Interestingly, participants distinguished sports sponsorship from sponsorship of other events such as music festivals, which they believed was more acceptable because music festival attendees are mostly over the age of 18.

**Recognition of alibi and surrogate marketing**

When shown examples of alibi sponsorship (e.g., slogans and colours associated with alcohol brands but without direct references to brand names), most participants quickly identified the corresponding alcohol brands. They expressed concerns that this type of marketing was being used to exploit loopholes in advertising regulations. Similarly, when shown images of NoLo product sponsorship, most participants did not initially recognise them as non-alcoholic drinks. Instead, they focused on how the branding closely resembled regular-strength alcohol products. Many believed that NoLo branding should be made more distinct to prevent confusion and potential indirect promotion of alcohol consumption.

Alcohol marketing significantly influences drinking behaviours, especially among young people. [Research](https://academic.oup.com/alcalc/article-abstract/44/3/229/178279?redirectedFrom=fulltext) links exposure to alcohol marketing with earlier drinking initiation, increased consumption, and higher risks of alcohol-related problems. Companies use television, social media, and product placements to create appealing narratives that [downplay drinking risks](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.13591). Targeted marketing disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, such as adolescents and lower-income individuals, exacerbating [public health concerns](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.15074).

Alcohol sponsorship in sports raises concerns due to its visibility and influence on young audiences. [Sponsorships](https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/14/7/704) link alcohol brands with teams, leagues, and events, embedding branding into stadiums, broadcasts, social media, and merchandise. Such sponsorships normalise alcohol consumption, particularly among young fans who look up to sportspeople. [Research](https://academic.oup.com/alcalc/article/51/6/747/2374095) connects exposure to alcohol sponsorship with earlier drinking initiation, higher consumption levels, and greater alcohol-related risks. Unlike traditional ads, sponsorship integrates branding seamlessly into the sports experience, reinforcing associations between alcohol and socialising.

As regulations on alcohol advertising and sponsorship tighten in certain countries, alcohol companies have adopted alternative marketing strategies to maintain brand visibility. One such approach is alibi marketing, where other brand signifiers—such as slogans, fonts, or brand colours—are used instead of the brand name to continue sponsorship without explicitly advertising alcohol. Another method is surrogate marketing, where alcohol brands use non-alcoholic or low-alcohol (NoLo) product variations, such as ‘X Brand 0.0%’, to continue sponsorship of sporting events in countries where alcohol advertising is [restricted](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11845-023-03331-8).

This briefing summarises research exploring the extent and nature of young people's exposure to alcohol sponsorship, including where and how often they see it, and their perceptions of it. Researchers also investigated young people’s views on alibi and surrogate marketing, particularly whether they differentiate between the marketing of NoLo variations and their regular-strength counterparts.

Study

Ten online focus groups were conducted with young people aged 11-17 living in Scotland. Participants were recruited via a market research agency and grouped based on age (11-13, 14-15, 16-17) and sex (male/female). Each focus group was facilitated by at least two researchers using a combination of slides featuring various images and a semi-structured topic guide covering key themes such as brand awareness, sponsorship activities, acceptability of alcohol sponsorship, sponsorship by NoLo brands and the use of alibi marketing.

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

**1**: Where and when do young people see alcohol sports sponsorship?

**2**: What are young people’s views on alcohol sports sponsorship?

**3**: What are young people’s views on the use of NoLo and alibi marketing?

Recommendations

Participants strongly supported stricter regulations to prevent young people from being exposed to alcohol sponsorship and to stop alibi marketing and NoLo products from being used as loopholes in alcohol marketing bans.

Suggestions included:

* **Stronger sponsorship restrictions**: Alcohol sponsorship in sports should be limited to prevent young audience members from being exposed to alcohol branding.
* **Clearer branding distinctions**: NoLo products should have distinct branding to differentiate them from their alcoholic counterparts.
* **Addressing alibi marketing**: Regulations should close loopholes that allow alcohol brands to maintain visibility through indirect advertising.

By implementing these measures, policymakers can help mitigate the influence of alcohol marketing on young people and ensure that public health policies remain effective in reducing underage drinking.

About this research

This briefing is based on research undertaken by:

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[The Institute for Social Marketing and Health (ISMH](https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties/health-sciences-sport/research/research-groups/institute-for-social-marketing/)), based at the University of Stirling, is a world-leading centre for research in marketing, behaviour change and public policy with over 40 years’ experience of research leading to improvements in population health and wellbeing.

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