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'If you've got it shown to you from a young age, it's going to be more hardwired into your brain': young people's views on alcohol sports sponsorship

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ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol sports sponsorship is a prominent marketing strategy that links alcohol with athletic success, celebration, and fandom. Sponsorship has been associated with harmful drinking behaviors, yet little is known about how young people interpret these messages. This study explores how young people understand and evaluate alcohol sports sponsorship, including perceived contradictions and processes of normalization.

Methods: Ten online focus groups were conducted with 44 young people aged 11–17 years in Scotland. Groups were stratified by age and sex and analyzed using qualitative content analysis to explore awareness, interpretations, and attitudes toward alcohol sponsorship.

Results: Participants reported frequent exposure to alcohol sponsorship, particularly through televised sport and social media. They demonstrated a clear understanding of sponsorship as a marketing strategy and often viewed alcohol's presence in sport as incongruous with its health-oriented values. However, these views co-existed with more permissive attitudes in spectator and leisure contexts, where alcohol consumption was seen as normative, particularly for adults. Participants also expressed concerns about the potential influence on younger audiences.

Conclusion: Young people critically yet contextually interpret alcohol sports sponsorship, reflecting both skepticism and normalization. These findings highlight the need to consider how marketing is embedded across youth-accessible contexts when developing policy responses.

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Introduction

Alcohol marketing plays a powerful role in shaping social norms and influencing behaviors related to alcohol consumption. Evidence demonstrates a clear association between exposure to alcohol marketing and both earlier onset of drinking and increased levels of consumption, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Giesbrecht et al., 2024). Sports sponsorship is one form of alcohol marketing, strategically associating alcohol brands with elite athletic performance, success, and celebration (Powell et al., 2025). Alcohol producers have invested heavily in sports sponsorship to enhance brand visibility, build consumer loyalty, and align their products with positive attributes such as success, excitement, and physical prowess (Babor et al., 2022; Purves & Critchlow, 2020). This approach is particularly effective in reaching

younger audiences, who are highly engaged with sport and more receptive to brand messaging (Brown, 2016; Jones et al., 2016). While lucrative for both sponsors and sports organizations, this marketing strategy raises important ethical and public health concerns.

A growing body of international research has examined the relationship between alcohol marketing, including sports sponsorship, and youth drinking behaviors (e.g. Bain et al., 2023; Dumbili et al., 2025). Studies show that adolescents exposed to alcohol sponsorship in sport are more likely to engage in binge drinking and develop longer-term harmful consumption patterns (de Bruijn et al., 2016). Young audiences may interpret sponsorship as implicit endorsement by teams or athletes, reinforcing positive associations with alcohol (Jones et al., 2016). Furthermore, aligning alcohol with health-oriented activities such as football or rugby may obscure

well-established harms, including increased risk of injury, dependency, and chronic disease (WHO, 2018). There is more limited evidence exploring how young people themselves interpret alcohol sports sponsorship, particularly within specific national contexts where regulatory approaches, sporting cultures, and media environments may differ. Understanding these perspectives is critical, as young people are not passive recipients of marketing but active interpreters of its meaning.

This gap is particularly relevant in the United Kingdom (UK), where alcohol marketing is primarily governed through industry self-regulation rather than statutory restriction. While some countries, such as France under the Loi Évin, have implemented comprehensive restrictions on alcohol sponsorship in sport (Gallopel-Morvan et al., 2017), the UK regulatory framework permits widespread alcohol sponsorship, subject to certain industry-regulated conditions - namely, that sponsorship promotes responsible drinking, does not involve individuals under the age of 18, and is limited to events where at least 75% of the audience is over 18 (Portman Group, 2023). At the same time, the UK has a highly commercialized sporting landscape and high levels of youth engagement with live, televised and digital sport, potentially increasing both exposure to and normalization of alcohol marketing.

There are several key gaps in understanding how young people in the UK perceive and are influenced by sports sponsorship, particularly when it involves health-harming products such as alcohol. Existing research provides limited insight into how young people interpret sponsorship as a marketing strategy, how and where they encounter it, and how such exposure may shape their attitudes, social norms, and perceptions of acceptability. Furthermore, young people's views on the appropriateness of alcohol sponsorship across different contexts, as well as their perspectives on policy regulation and the need to protect youth audiences, remain underexplored. Addressing these gaps is essential for informing effective public health interventions and the development of more robust regulatory frameworks.

Accordingly, this study aimed to examine young people's awareness, interpretations, and evaluations of alcohol sports sponsorship. Specifically, it addressed the following research questions: (1) where and how young people encounter alcohol sponsorship in sport; (2) how they understand and interpret its purpose as a marketing strategy; (3) how they perceive the relationship between alcohol and sport, including any perceived contradictions; (4) the extent to which such sponsorship contributes to the normalization of

alcohol; (5) how acceptable they perceive alcohol sponsorship to be across different contexts (e.g. sport versus other events); and (6) their views on the potential impacts of sponsorship on young people and the need for regulatory action. This study forms part of a larger project exploring young people's perspectives on alcohol sports sponsorship (Purves et al., 2026).

Methods

Study design

This study adopted a qualitative design, utilizing online focus groups. This method was selected to facilitate rich, in-depth discussions that could capture participants' awareness, interpretations, and attitudes. The decision to conduct the groups online was influenced by project timelines and budgetary considerations. Additionally, the online format enabled collaboration across geographically dispersed members of the research team based in Scotland and England.

Participants

A total of ten online focus groups were conducted with 44 young people aged 11–17 years residing in Scotland. To ensure diversity and facilitate age-appropriate discussion, focus groups were stratified by both age and sex (Table 1). The three age cohorts were: 11–13 years, 14–15 years, and 16–17 years. Groups were organized separately for male and female participants within each age band to support open dialogue and to account for potential differences in gendered experiences and interpretations.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a professional market research agency with experience in engaging young people for qualitative research. Screening questions, developed in collaboration with the research team, were distributed to adult panel members with

Table 1. Details of focus group participants.

Group	Country	Age	Sex	Number of participants
1	Scotland	11–13	Female	5
2	Scotland	11–13	Male	5
3	Scotland	11–13	Female	4
4	Scotland	14–15	Male	4
5	Scotland	14–15	Female	3
6	Scotland	14–15	Male	4
7	Scotland	14–15	Female	4
8	Scotland	16–17	Male	5
9	Scotland	16–17	Female	5
10	Scotland	16–17	Male	5

children who met the study's eligibility criteria (residing in Scotland, English-speaking, and aged 11–17). Parents who expressed interest in their child's participation were contacted by the recruitment team via telephone, during which further information about the study was shared and the child's ability to articulate responses was assessed. Relevant information sheets and consent forms were then emailed to families. For participants aged 11–15, written consent was obtained from both the parent/guardian and the young person, while those aged 16–17 provided consent independently. Completed consent forms were securely submitted to the research team via a password-protected database.

Procedure

All focus groups were held online using a secure video conferencing platform (Microsoft Teams) to ensure ease of access and adherence to health and safety guidelines. An online host, provided by the market research agency, was responsible for coordinating each session. This included setting up the virtual meeting room, admitting participants to an online waiting area, and contacting any individuals who had not joined on time to check for technical issues and confirm attendance. Once all participants were accounted for, the host granted access to both participants and moderators to begin the session. In accordance with Market Research Society (MRS) guidelines, parents were informed that they should accompany their child to the session, with a particular emphasis on remaining in the room for the younger age groups to ensure appropriate supervision.

The focus groups were conducted by two researchers aged between 25 and 35 years, one male and one female. Both researchers had prior experience facilitating qualitative research with young people. Their relatively young age was considered beneficial for building rapport with participants aged 11–17, potentially helping participants feel more comfortable sharing their views. At the same time, the researchers remained aware that, as adults and as individuals with professional interests in public health, their perspectives and assumptions about alcohol marketing and sponsorship could influence how discussions were facilitated and interpreted. Throughout the study, they aimed to minimize this influence by using open-ended questions, encouraging a range of viewpoints, and reflecting on how their positionality might shape the research process and interpretation of findings. The use of focus groups enabled participants to engage with and respond to each other's views, often prompting reflection, clarification, and the sharing of additional

examples, particularly when discussing familiar experiences such as exposure to alcohol sponsorship. While group-based methods can introduce the potential for participants to align their responses, we observed both consensus and divergence within and across groups. Participants at times reinforced shared perspectives, but also expressed differing views, particularly in relation to the acceptability of alcohol sponsorship in different contexts and the need for regulation. As such, the group dynamic not only shaped how views were expressed but also provided insight into how young people collectively negotiate and make sense of alcohol sponsorship. Prior to each session, participants and their guardians provided informed consent, and assent was obtained from all participants. Researchers were Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked to provide extra reassurance to parents.

Each session followed a semi-structured format guided by a predefined topic guide. The topic guide was developed using an iterative process informed by existing literature on alcohol marketing, marketing exposure, and sponsorship (Purves et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2022; Boelsen-Robinson et al., 2022). These studies helped identify key domains including brand recognition, understanding of sponsorship, exposure to marketing, and attitudes toward alcohol sponsorship. The semi-structured format allowed consistent coverage of topics while enabling participants to share their own experiences and interpretations.

Discussions began with general brand awareness, where participants were shown examples of brand logos and asked whether they recognized them and what they represented, followed by questions about other ways companies attract attention and promote products. The guide then introduced the topic of sponsorship, asking participants whether they had heard the term, how they defined it, and where they had seen examples. Visual examples of sports sponsorship were presented to explore recognition of brands, teams, and sports, how frequently participants encountered sponsorship, whether they had seen it in other contexts (e.g. individuals, sports events, music festivals, or cultural events), and whether some forms of sponsorship were more acceptable than others. The final section focused on alcohol sponsorship, exploring whether participants had noticed alcohol brands in earlier examples, where and how often they had seen alcohol sponsorship in sport, recognition of additional examples, and their views on alcohol brands sponsoring sport, including perceived benefits or downsides, whether certain activities should not be sponsored, whether sponsorship of other events differed from sport, and whether alcohol sponsorship should be

allowed or regulated. Visual prompts were carefully chosen to reflect real-life branding examples from sports and entertainment settings, helping to provoke genuine, contextually grounded responses.

To minimize priming, the discussion began with broader brand categories (e.g. fast food, electronics, sportswear, and alcohol) before focusing more narrowly on alcohol-related content. Each group discussion lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim by an external transcription agency. To ensure accuracy and maintain the integrity of participants' responses, the research team reviewed each transcript alongside its corresponding recording. Personal identifiers were removed during transcription to ensure participant anonymity.

Analysis

A qualitative content analysis approach was used to examine the focus group data, enabling the identification, categorization, and interpretation of recurring patterns and themes (Krippendorff, 2018). This method was chosen for its effectiveness in exploring subjective experiences and the processes through which individuals construct meaning, particularly within the context of structured group discussions.

The analysis followed several iterative stages. Initially, researchers independently reviewed the transcripts to become familiar with the data. A preliminary coding framework was developed using a combination of deductive codes derived from the study's topic guide (e.g. brand recognition, recall of sponsorship, perceived influence of marketing) and inductive codes that emerged from participants' accounts. Examples of inductive codes included why companies sponsor sports teams and events (e.g. visibility, brand association with success), tensions between athleticism and alcohol (e.g. perceived contradiction between health and drinking), more acceptable forms of sponsorship (e.g. sponsorship of music festivals), normalization of alcohol (e.g. alcohol as an expected part of sport culture), and protecting children and young people (e.g. concerns about exposure and age-appropriateness).

Coding was conducted in NVivo (Version 20) to support systematic organization and retrieval of data. An initial subset of transcripts was double coded by multiple researchers to refine the coding framework; discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, with codes clarified, merged, or redefined where necessary. The remaining transcripts were then coded using the agreed framework, with regular team discussions to ensure consistency and to incorporate any new inductive insights.

Codes were subsequently grouped into preliminary thematic categories by examining patterns, similarities, and differences across participants and focus groups. For example, codes such as brand recognition and recall of sponsorship were grouped under a preliminary category of awareness and visibility, while normalization of alcohol and why companies sponsor sports contributed to a category around perceived purpose and impact of sponsorship. Similarly, tensions between athleticism and alcohol and protecting children and young people informed a category related to perceived harms and ethical concerns. Through iterative comparison and team-based interpretation, these preliminary categories were further refined and synthesized into higher-order themes that captured the central patterns in the data (e.g. normalization and cultural embedding of alcohol in sport, negotiating acceptability of alcohol sponsorship, and concerns about youth exposure and protection).

Results

When and where young people encounter alcohol sponsorship

Groups began with a general discussion on sponsorship and participants were asked if they had heard this term before. During discussions, participants demonstrated a nuanced and well-developed understanding of sponsorship. Notably, even the youngest participants were able to articulate clear definitions of what sponsorship entails, along with insightful explanations of the commercial motivations behind it. Many recognized that companies engage in sponsorship as a strategic form of marketing, aiming to enhance brand visibility, associate with particular values or audiences, and ultimately drive product promotion and sales: put simply, 'people see it, they want to get it' (Group 6, 14–15, Male).

Is it [sponsorship] not when a company pays like a football team or a certain person a certain amount of money for them either saying good things about the brand or like put their brand on the football strip, or something like that? (Group 5, 14–15, Female).

When asked why they believed alcohol companies might be interested in sponsoring sports teams and events, participants commonly cited the widespread popularity of sports as a key factor. They reasoned that such sponsorships offered alcohol brands extensive exposure to large and diverse audiences, both through live attendance and media coverage.

I also think football or rugby; they're really highly watched sports. There's always like full stadiums and there's always a lot of people watching online, so they [sponsors] know they've got a large audience (Group 5, 14–15, Female).

Participants recognized that this visibility could enhance brand recognition and potentially increase consumer engagement, particularly given the strong emotional and cultural significance often attached to sporting events.

Frequent and consistent exposure to alcohol sponsorship was reported, with many indicating that they encountered such messaging on a near-daily basis. This exposure was observed across multiple platforms, including television broadcasts, social media feeds, and advertisements displayed on public transport.

Int1: how often would you guys say you're seeing different types of sponsorships?

R5: Quite a lot.

Int1: And how often would you say quite a lot is?

R1: Daily.

Int1: Would everyone agree with that?

R5: It's on buses as well, I think.

R5: So, yeah, it's every day.

Int2: Yeah, and how often do you think you see it when you're watching sport, alcohol sponsorship?

R2: Every time (Group 6, 14-15, Male).

Televised sports - particularly football and rugby - were identified by participants as the primary source of their exposure to alcohol sponsorship. Many were able to recall specific examples of sponsorship activity encountered while watching these sports on television, indicating a strong recall and awareness of branding in this context. Participants generally perceived televised broadcasts as presenting more frequent and prominent sponsorship messaging compared to live sporting events.

Int1: How common do you see alcohol sponsorship, when you are watching sport?

R3: Quite a lot actually, especially on TV for, like, football games and stuff you just see it everywhere.

R2: Yes, if you are actually watching it [in person], you just see the advertising that is on the stadium, but if you are watching at home, you see the stadium and you also see all the adverts they put in the middle. They always put similar adverts in it as the ones that are round the stadium (Group 7, 14-15, Female).

Questioning the logic of alcohol sports sponsorship

When asked for their views on alcohol brands sponsoring sports teams and events, participants commonly

expressed skepticism and uneasiness. Participants struggled to reconcile the image of athleticism and health with the marketing of alcohol - a product widely understood to have negative health implications.

I'd agree with, like, the fact it's a bit ironic for sports, which is obviously linked with health, to be partnered with alcohol which would maybe be linked with unhealthy lifestyles, yeah (Group 8, 16-17, Male).

This tension was reinforced by the belief that professional athletes would be unlikely to consume alcohol prior to competition, further undermining the perceived appropriateness of such sponsorship relationships. Many indicated that such sponsorships did not make sense to them, reflecting a perceived incongruity between the promotion of alcohol and the values typically associated with sport.

R1: It doesn't really make any sense.

Int2: Why?

R1: There is no relation between them, and it doesn't make much sense for them to be sponsoring them.

R4: I agree because it is, like, the athletes can't drink when they are playing, so I don't understand what the correlation between drinking and sports is (Group 7, 14-15, Female).

The association between alcohol brands and sports was not viewed positively by participants. Younger participants frequently described alcohol sports sponsorship as 'confusing', reflecting a perceived inconsistency between the branding and the behaviors of professional athletes. This dissonance led younger participants to question the appropriateness and logic of such sponsorships, suggesting a critical awareness of the mixed messages conveyed when health-oriented activities are linked to potentially harmful products.

R5: I think it is confusing as to why they sponsor it. I don't think a footballer is going to be drinking before he goes to play a match or something.

Int: what makes it confusing?

R5: Obviously you drink alcohol for different reasons. I don't think any players would really drink that before a match because they probably wouldn't be able to play as good as they would (Group 1, 11-13, Female).

Many expressed concerns that such sponsorships conflicted with the health-promoting values inherently linked to sport and physical activity. This perceived incongruity led some participants to question the

appropriateness of aligning health-oriented events with products that may undermine well-being.

R3: It's not a good message to send on the young people watching the sports.

R1: Yeah, there's that and, like, sports are supposed to be associated with a healthy lifestyle and blah, blah, blah, so associating them with alcohol maybe might turn that.

Int2: Yeah. So do you think it just contradicts that whole message?

R3: Yeah, a wee bit (Group 8, 16-17, Male).

Participants expressed the view that sports, both in live settings and through televised broadcasts, are very popular among young audiences, and as such, they considered it an unsuitable platform for alcohol marketing.

R3: Depending on the household sometimes, watching sport can be like a family activity, so if it is a family activity, then oftentimes from a young age you'll be shown alcohol whenever you're watching sport

R2: I think maybe like Olympic teams, because like football and stuff, it might be family but like Olympics is like really watched by the whole nation, especially it's got a way younger audience, I think. So, I think if definitely younger people are seeing it, they might be like, oh, what's that? (Group 5, 14-15, Female).

Interestingly, participants made a clear distinction between alcohol sponsorship in sport and sponsorship of other types of events, such as music festivals. While the former was viewed as problematic due to the presence of younger audiences and the health-oriented nature of sport, sponsorship of music festivals was perceived as more acceptable. Participants justified this distinction by noting that music festival attendees are predominantly adults, many of whom legally consume alcohol and have access to it on-site. As such, the alignment between alcohol brands and music festivals was seen as more contextually appropriate and less likely to send conflicting messages.

R4: I feel like most people that go to music festivals are of the age to drink. It kind of makes sense to drink there more so than sports.

Int2: Why do you think that is?

R4: I just feel like in sports there is no reason to drink, but here I feel like it is more acceptable. I am not saying that they should go wild, but if they have got to sponsor it somewhere rather at a music festival than at a sports stadium.

R2: I would say I can agree with that. At sports people of all ages go there to watch the game. Whereas at

music festivals it seems like it is mainly over 18s that go there wanting to have fun. So it would make more sense for alcohol to be sponsored there rather than sports (Group 7, 14-15, Female).

Participants' accounts suggest that the perceived acceptability of alcohol sponsorship at music festivals was not based solely on assumptions about legal drinking age. Rather, these views were also shaped by broader cultural associations between alcohol, leisure, and having fun. Music festivals were constructed as adult-oriented spaces centered on enjoyment and socializing, where alcohol consumption is seen as more normative and expected. In contrast, sport was viewed as a more inclusive setting attended by people of all ages. This highlights an important nuance in participants' reasoning, where acceptability is informed not only by age-related considerations but also by the normalization of alcohol within particular social and cultural contexts.

The sporting normalization of alcohol

Many participants described alcohol sponsorship in sport as a longstanding and familiar presence, with some noting that it was ever-present throughout their experiences of watching sports. This sense of continuity contributed to a broader acceptance of alcohol sponsorship as an inevitable aspect of the sporting landscape. For several participants, the persistent visibility of alcohol branding during sports broadcasts and events appeared to normalize its presence, leading them to view it as an embedded and almost unavoidable feature of the sporting experience

I mean, yes, the undertone of alcohol, it's always been there, like present in sporting events is obviously not very good, because if you're younger, then, you're always seeing it, so it's becoming quite like normal, almost. So, I don't think that's going to really have positive effects growing up, to be honest (Group 9, 16-17, Female).

Participants highlighted that young people who watch sports are frequently and consistently exposed to alcohol marketing through a range of sponsorship activities. This repeated exposure, occurring across multiple platforms such as televised broadcasts, stadium branding, and merchandise, was perceived to play a significant role in normalizing the association between alcohol and sport.

R1: The audience is quite often kids

Int1: When you say kids, what kind of age range are you thinking there?

R1: At football games there is quite often kids that are eight or nine, maybe younger. Then there is a lot of under 18s, teenagers, who will see it. They are already tempted and stuff and if they see it being advertised at things like that then it might just make them think it is not a big deal or anything.

Int1: So it kind of normalises it?

R1: Yes (Group 7, 14-15, Female).

Participants suggested that such pervasive marketing fosters the impression that alcohol consumption is a routine and accepted part of the sporting experience, potentially shaping young viewers' attitudes and expectations regarding both alcohol use and sporting culture.

Some participants recounted witnessing alcohol consumption in the streets surrounding sports venues when attending sporting events. For these young people, such visible displays of drinking in the context of sports events served to further embed alcohol as an expected and accepted part of the sporting experience, potentially influencing their perceptions of both social norms and acceptable behavior in these settings.

R3: At football games, I see other people drinking alcohol.

Int: Yeah, is that quite common?

R3: Yeah, it's normally the older men and still some people that look a bit too young to drink as well.

Int: So is that in the pubs or where are you seeing that?

R3: Like, outside the stadium. People are sitting there, and they have bottles of alcohol and they're just drinking it before the game (Group 8, 16-17, Male).

Although participants generally found the association between alcohol and sport to be incongruous - particularly given the health-oriented nature of athletic activity - they also acknowledged the extent to which alcohol consumption is normalized for spectators. Many described alcohol as a routine component of the viewing experience for adults, especially during major football or rugby matches. Several participants specifically noted that attending pubs to watch live sports was a common social practice, reinforcing the cultural link between alcohol and sport despite their personal reservations about its appropriateness in promotional contexts.

R4: For football, it's, like, I feel a lot of people who go to the matches, they already drink so it's [sponsorship], like, not too much of a problem.

Int2: Can you name any party or side that would get benefits from that?

R3: Uhm-hmm. The alcohol is probably, like, their target market or whatever, you know. Because people go to the pubs to watch sport and stuff, so if they see the sport in the pub and it's advertising alcohol, they're going to want to get their alcohol (Group 10, 16-17, Male).

While participants often framed sport as a health-oriented activity - highlighting that athletes are unlikely to consume alcohol in the context of performance - they also recognized that alcohol sponsorship may be more acceptable when directed at adult spectators who can legally drink. This reflects a broader distinction between sport as a health pursuit for participants and as a leisure and entertainment context for audiences, within which alcohol consumption is more socially normalized.

Young people should be protected from alcohol sponsorship

Many participants voiced concerns about the appropriateness of alcohol sponsorship in sports, particularly in relation to its impact on young audiences. They expressed the view that such sponsorships could inadvertently encourage underage drinking by creating positive associations between alcohol and athleticism. By linking alcohol brands with admired sports teams, athletes, and high-profile events, participants feared that young viewers might come to perceive alcohol consumption as not only acceptable but aspirational. This was seen as especially problematic given the influence of sporting role models and the potential for such marketing to shape youth attitudes and behaviors toward drinking.

R3: Well, I mean, if, a beer brand was sponsoring, football or something, and, there's quite young people who watch football, so they might get influenced to maybe, try the beer or something.

Int1: Yeah, and can you see any problems with that?

R3: Well, it could, like, affect them and they could get, like...they could, like, get addicted to drinking, because that's what they're seeing (Group 3, 11-13, Female).

Participants expressed the view that regular exposure to alcohol marketing from an early age could have a priming effect on young people, shaping their future attitudes and behaviors toward alcohol consumption. They suggested that repeated exposure to specific brands and products through sponsorship may foster familiarity, brand recognition, and even preference over time. As a result, participants believed that young people who are consistently exposed to alcohol marketing during their formative years may be more

likely to experiment with or favor particular alcohol brands as they grow older.

I think it's when you're a bit older, obviously you're going to see it more, but from a young age, if you've got it shown to you from a young age, you're going to know about it more, so it's going to be more hard-wired into your brain (Group 5, 14-15, Female).

Participants believed that young people are particularly vulnerable to the influence of alcohol marketing due to the developmental stage they are in, during which personal identities, values, and preferences are still forming. They expressed concern that exposure to persuasive alcohol branding at this critical period could have harmful effects, potentially shaping attitudes and behaviors in ways that encourage early experimentation or the normalization of drinking.

I think with peer pressure and stuff, yes, because you will, when you get older, when you're going to high school especially, there's like this idea of trying to be popular and everything. A lot of the times the way to do it is to attempt to seem more grown up in whatever the most grown-up things, like within young people is probably drinking (Group 5, 14-15, Female).

Some participants discussed how alcohol sponsorship in sports contributed to the formation of positive associations between alcohol brands and sporting events. They observed that by aligning alcohol with the excitement, prestige, and popularity of sport, these sponsorships could foster favorable perceptions of alcohol among young people. This association was seen as particularly influential given the emotional engagement and admiration many young viewers have for sports and athletes. As a result, participants believed that such marketing practices may shape young people's beliefs about alcohol in a way that minimizes perceived risks and reinforces its acceptability within social and recreational contexts.

If you're watching football or rugby all the time, there's always an alcohol brand sponsoring it. So, you're going to think it's not that bad if they're sponsoring it that often. You know there could be kids watching it or teenagers, so teenagers might end up thinking that, if they were sponsoring it that much, it can't be that bad (Group 5, 14-15, Female).

Policy approaches to alcohol sponsorship

Participants discussed possible policy responses to alcohol sponsorship. There were some participants who did not feel that any action needed to be taken to either restrict or prevent alcohol sponsorship. They tended to think that the alcohol companies were using

sponsorship to increase their sales and if there were no restrictions on that currently then they were not doing anything wrong.

I feel fine with all the sponsors, like I don't see any problems with them. I don't really, like, think it's a problem, because they just want more sales (Group 3, 11-13, Female).

However, this was a minority view within the groups, with most agreeing that some action should be taken to protect young people from being exposed to alcohol sponsorship in sports. One suggestion was to limit when alcohol sponsorship could be shown so it did not feature in broadcasts which are shown when children could be watching

R5: I think, alcohol sponsoring was not supposed to be until certain times, it was like nine o'clock, or something? I'm not sure if that, I think that just counts for like TV adverts and not like in stadiums and stuff like you see on TV, sponsored there. So I'm not sure.

Int2: Do you think they could introduce that in sport? What's your thoughts on introducing a time limit or ban in sport? Do you think that would make sense?

R5: Yes, I think that would make more sense, to do that, if we're saying children shouldn't be exposed to too much advertising of alcohol, then I think making a time limit sort of ban, so when children go to sleep it's fine, because it's only really intended for consumers that are watching (Group 9, 16-17, Female).

Others suggested that there should be restrictions on where alcohol sponsorship can be displayed.

R2: Maybe limit what sports have it or where it's shown. For example, maybe don't show it on the pitch or something.

Int2: And why on the pitch, do you think?

R2: Because people watching TV are going to see it all the time. But I think maybe, I'm not sure, show it places where it's not less obvious, but maybe more, like target an older demographic (Group 5, 14-15, Female).

Discussion

This study provides insight into how young people understand and make sense of alcohol sports sponsorship, highlighting high levels of awareness, frequent exposure, and a generally critical yet context-dependent appraisal of its presence in sport. Participants demonstrated a clear understanding of sponsorship as a marketing strategy and often viewed the association between alcohol and sport as incongruous with the health-oriented nature of athletic activity. At the same

time, their accounts reflected the extent to which alcohol sponsorship is embedded within the sporting landscape, contributing to its normalization, particularly in spectator and leisure contexts. Participants also expressed concerns about the potential influence of such marketing on younger audiences, while recognizing distinctions in acceptability depending on context, such as adult-oriented events.

These findings suggest that young people may be routinely encountering alcohol sponsorship across a range of settings, particularly through televised sport and digital media, and are actively interpreting its meaning and implications. A key aim of regulatory frameworks in the UK is to limit young people's exposure to alcohol marketing (Portman Group, 2023). While the study was not designed to evaluate the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks, participants' reports of frequent exposure across everyday contexts raise questions about the extent to which current approaches may limit young people's encounters with alcohol marketing in practice. Participants in our research consistently reported frequent and routine exposure to alcohol sponsorship, with several indicating that such encounters occurred daily, particularly during engagement with televised sports events, social media platforms, and even during everyday travel through exposure to advertisements on public transport. This level of marketing saturation aligns with previous research suggesting that alcohol promotion is deeply embedded in youth-accessible spaces, especially those related to sport and entertainment (Chambers et al., 2018). For example, de Bruijn et al. (2012) found that sports sponsorship remains a prominent and underregulated channel for alcohol branding which influences alcohol consumption among adolescents. Research by Purves et al. (2017) has demonstrated how alcohol sponsorship often circumvents restrictions via exposure through shirt sponsorship, event names, and broadcast content. Self-regulatory models, such as those in the UK, have been shown to lack enforcement power and exhibit poor compliance. Babor et al. (2022) and Hastings (2009) argue that industry-led codes often fail to restrict content placement effectively and do not account for cumulative exposure across media. This weakness allows marketing messages to penetrate youth-dense environments, especially online, where algorithmic targeting and influencer culture often amplify brand messaging outside traditional regulation scopes (Nicholls, 2012).

The daily exposure reported by some participants underscores the perceived normality of alcohol sponsorship among young audiences. This habitual exposure reflects a broader structural integration of alcohol

marketing into public and private life; wherein regulatory blind spots permit ongoing influence over adolescent attitudes and behaviors toward alcohol. For instance, Jernigan and Ross (2020) found that repeated exposure to alcohol marketing is associated with both earlier initiation of drinking and increased consumption among young people, suggesting that current regulatory practices do not merely fail to prevent harm but may inadvertently facilitate it.

Participants in this study generally perceived televised sports broadcasts as presenting more frequent and prominent alcohol sponsorship messages compared to when attending live sporting events, highlighting television as a particularly potent platform for alcohol marketing. This aligns with previous research indicating that televised sport serves as a highly effective vector for embedding alcohol brands into the viewing experience through repetitive and strategically placed visual cues, such as pitch-side advertisements, on-screen logos, and sponsorship segments (de Bruijn et al., 2012; Purves et al., 2014). The domestic setting in which televised sport is typically consumed is often social, relaxed, and family-oriented which may amplify the subtle normalization of alcohol consumption, reinforcing positive brand associations and integrating alcohol into leisure routines (Alfayad et al., 2022). Unlike in-stadium experiences, where distractions and live dynamics may dilute marketing visibility, televised broadcasts often enhance branding exposure through techniques such as close-ups, replays, and half-time advertisements (Ireland, 2023). Moreover, young people may be particularly susceptible to these messages due to the high frequency of exposure during peak-viewing times and the aspirational associations between sport and lifestyle conveyed through sponsorship (Valette-Florence et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of strengthening regulations not only at the point of live event sponsorship but also in broadcast environments, where marketing practices are often less scrutinized yet arguably more impactful due to their reach and embeddedness in everyday contexts.

Participants in this study highlighted a perceived contradiction between the promotion of alcohol and the health-promoting values traditionally associated with sport, reinforcing concerns about the alignment of commercial interests with health-oriented environments (Jacobs et al., 2025). While sport is widely recognized for its physical, mental, and social health benefits (Eime et al., 2013; WHO, 2018), alcohol remains a leading modifiable risk factor for global morbidity and mortality (WHO, 2024). Consistent with previous research demonstrating the 'alcohol-sport nexus' and

its inherently paradoxical nature (Kelly & Ireland, 2019; Palmer, 2014), participants drew on this tension in their accounts, positioning alcohol sponsorship as incongruent with athletic performance and health. However, these perceptions co-existed with more permissive views when alcohol marketing was framed as targeting adult spectators or situated within leisure-oriented contexts such as music festivals. While participants generally regarded sport as a domain that promotes physical activity and wellbeing, they also recognized that for many adults, particularly spectators rather than athletes, alcohol consumption was a routine and socially accepted element of the viewing experience. This normalization was most observed during high-profile events, such as major football or rugby matches, where drinking alcohol - often in pubs or communal spaces - was described as integral to the social ritual of watching sport. These findings align with prior research highlighting the close association between alcohol and the collective experience of sports fandom, wherein drinking is perceived not only as acceptable but as expected in certain contexts (Bandura et al., 2024; Purves et al., 2022). This suggests that the apparent contradictions in young people's narratives are better understood as context-dependent and shaped by competing cultural frames: a health-oriented discourse linked to participation, and a leisure-oriented discourse in which alcohol consumption is normalized as part of entertainment and socializing (Boelsen-Robinson et al., 2022; Gordon et al., 2010). In this way, participants' reasoning reflects broader processes of normalization, whereby alcohol is simultaneously constructed as incompatible with sport as a health practice, yet acceptable - and even expected - within particular social and cultural spaces associated with sport spectatorship and recreation.

Participants also reported witnessing public alcohol consumption in the vicinity of sports venues, especially during live events. These visible displays of drinking, particularly in public or semipublic spaces such as streets, pubs, and fan zones, were noted to reinforce the perception of alcohol as a normative component of the sporting environment (Pearson & Sale, 2011). From a public health perspective, such visibility is concerning, particularly for younger audiences, who may interpret these behaviors as indicative of adult social norms and acceptable conduct in public life. Exposure to alcohol use in highly charged, celebratory sporting settings may contribute to early socialization into drinking cultures, shaping young people's expectations around alcohol and sport (Jones et al., 2010).

Notably, participants frequently referred to alcohol sponsorship in sport as a familiar and longstanding

feature of their viewing experiences. For many, the presence of alcohol branding during sports broadcasts, on team kits, and in stadium marketing was perceived as an almost ubiquitous element of the sporting spectacle. This perceived continuity contributed to a broader sense of inevitability and passive acceptance of alcohol sponsorship, with several participants commenting that alcohol 'has always been there'. Such sentiments reflect how commercial influences can become entrenched in the cultural fabric of sport, making them less likely to be critically questioned over time (Hill & Casswell, 2004).

Strengths and limitations

This study offers insight into how young people perceive alcohol sponsorship in sport and the ways in which it contributes to the normalization of alcohol. A key strength is the qualitative design, which enabled in-depth exploration of how participants interpret and make sense of these marketing practices. The use of age- and gender-stratified online focus groups supported open discussion and captured diverse perspectives, while visual prompts based on real-world sponsorship enhanced ecological validity by reflecting everyday exposure.

However, several limitations should be noted. Online focus groups may have constrained engagement and limited observation of non-verbal cues, while recruitment via a market research panel may have introduced bias toward more media-aware participants. The sample was also limited to young people in Scotland, which may affect transferability. Social desirability bias is another consideration, as participants may have shaped their responses in a group setting when discussing alcohol. While the study highlights how alcohol sponsorship in sport is recognized and, at times, normalized by young people, it does not assess longer-term behavioral impacts or identify effective policy responses. Further research is needed to examine how these perceptions develop over time and how exposure to both overt and covert marketing influences attitudes and behaviors in different social contexts.

Conclusion

Young people engage with alcohol sports sponsorship in nuanced ways, demonstrating both critical awareness and contextual acceptance. While many recognize the incongruity between alcohol and the health-oriented nature of sport, this skepticism coexists with a broader sense that alcohol is a normal and expected part of

sporting culture, particularly in spectator settings. Frequent exposure across televised sport, digital media, and everyday environments reinforces this normalization, embedding alcohol within routine viewing and social practices. These findings emphasize the importance of accounting for how alcohol marketing operates across interconnected, youth-accessible contexts, and how repeated, context-dependent exposure shapes young people's interpretations when considering effective policy responses.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Richard I. Purves**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Jack G. Martin**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Piotr Teodorowski**: Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Olivia Brown**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University General University Ethics Panel (GUEP 19806). In securing this approval, we acknowledged the potential risk that exposing young participants to examples of alcohol marketing - including sponsorship materials - could unintentionally make these brands or products appear attractive. To address this concern, researchers clearly explained the purpose of showing the marketing images and, at the end of each session, verbally highlighted the risks associated with alcohol consumption, with particular emphasis on the dangers of underage drinking. Participants were also given a link to further information on the health risks related to underage alcohol use at the end of the session.

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