

The Impact of Alcohol Marketing on People in Recovery

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Summary

- People with (or at risk of) an alcohol problem are at increased risk from alcohol marketing, as they experience disproportionate harm from alcohol use and have increased susceptibility to alcohol marketing.
- Alcohol marketers explicitly target people who drink heavily, so that they are regularly exposed to alcohol marketing.
- Alcohol marketing fosters positive alcohol-related feelings and emotions and triggers alcohol cravings, which may translate into effects on alcohol consumption in these groups.
- People in recovery highlight marketing as being an environmental trigger that threatens their recovery. It impacts their ability to live and thrive in their communities and intrudes into their homes and private spaces.
- There is currently limited protection of people with (or at risk of) an alcohol problem from alcohol marketing.
- The Scottish Government consultation on restricting alcohol advertising and promotion in Scotland offers an opportunity for us to be ambitious and to put people’s right to health before company profits by introducing restrictions.

Exposure to alcohol marketing

The alcohol industry is financially dependent on heavy drinking;^{1,2} for example, in England, the heaviest 20% of drinkers account for an estimated 70% of the total quantity of alcohol sold, with the heaviest drinking 4% of the population accounting for almost a quarter of all revenues.³ If all consumers reduced their drinking to within guideline levels, alcohol sales revenue could decline by 38% (£13 billion).⁴ It is therefore in the industry’s interest for people to drink at harmful levels. An analysis of advertising case studies revealed how, across brands and drink types, alcohol companies and marketers explicitly target people who drink heavily.⁵

Despite this, under the current self-regulated marketing codes in the UK, there is no recognition of the specific vulnerability of people with (or at risk of) an alcohol problem to alcohol marketing. As such, there are no special protections provided to them above any other member of the general adult population.

As such, they are regularly exposed to alcohol marketing.^{6,7} A focus group with people in recovery, held in February 2022, found that most of the group noticed alcohol advertisements at least five times a day.⁸

“From the start of the day when I’m at the bus stop, it’s there on the billboards as I get from A to B, it’s in the shops, most of them – it’s everywhere.”

Person in recovery

Effects of alcohol marketing on people with alcohol problems

One way in which exposure to marketing can affect behaviour is through presenting cues – such as a picture of an alcoholic drink or a brand – that stimulate consumption.^{9,10} Evidence indicates that the more someone drinks, the more likely they are to pay attention to alcohol cues,¹¹ which, in turn, leads to increased cravings,¹² creating a vicious cycle whereby stimuli become more noticeable as cravings increase, and vice-versa.¹³

“It makes me want to have a drink when I’m trying so hard to stay off it.”

Person in recovery

Findings from an AFS-commissioned literature review demonstrate that marketing effects have the potential to translate into increased alcohol use.¹⁴ Alcohol marketing encourages consumption and risk-taking behaviour among heavier drinkers,¹⁵ causes higher craving levels,¹⁶ and fosters positive alcohol-related emotions and cognitions which may make it difficult for heavy drinkers to reduce consumption.¹⁷

There is a clear overlap between the evidence gathered from academic research and testimonials from people with lived and living experience. A survey from the Alcohol Health Alliance and focus groups with people in recovery supported by AFS have highlighted that marketing can trigger relapse and make it difficult for people to abstain from alcohol consumption.^{18 19} What people's own testimony suggests is that exposure to alcohol marketing impacts on their ability to live and thrive in their communities in the same way as others.

The same holds true even for the marketing of alcohol-free products. Brand familiarity was found to increase the intention to consume alcohol following exposure to beer adverts for moderate drinkers, but the biggest increase was seen in those at greatest risk of alcohol harm.²⁰ In a focus group run by *We Are With You*, a charity that supports people with alcohol problems, some participants viewed the advertising of alcohol-free products by known alcohol brands as a way for the industry to entice people in recovery back to drinking alcohol.²¹

"Alcohol marketing is utterly ubiquitous, it's really hard to forget about the urge to have a drink when you're surrounded by it. Even the ads for alcohol free variants."

Person in recovery

Lifestyle messages and high visibility of alcohol promotion

"It suggests that alcohol is completely normal and acceptable. It evokes memories of being 'normal' and having 'fun' and tempts me back continually."

Person in recovery

The normalising effect of marketing, particularly when using lifestyle messaging, serves to convey the impression that alcohol is an integral part of life in our society, and that it is enjoyable and enjoyed by the majority who are able to 'drink responsibly.'

The content of adverts has been identified as challenging for people in recovery, with music and party scenes particularly troubling in creating an association with good times.²² People reported negative emotions when viewing alcohol advertisements, including loss, lack of belonging, sadness, guilt and exclusion from the norm.²³

People in recovery perceive a variety of marketing tactics as being particularly problematic, including billboards, the sponsorship by alcohol brands of sporting events; and the in-store display and promotion of alcohol.^{24 25} The retail environment has been identified as especially challenging. A Scottish qualitative study highlighted the high visibility of alcohol and advertising in shops as a risk to recovery, with people actively avoiding the alcohol aisles in bigger stores as well as small shops where alcohol is often located in full view behind the till.²⁶ Focus group discussions reinforce this point, with people noting the difficulty in going shopping for food and essential items when most shops sell alcohol, often placed in areas that are clearly visible and unavoidable.²⁷

Protecting people with (or at risk of) an alcohol problem

People in recovery can experience significant health and social harms as a result of alcohol – losing their jobs, homes, families, their mental or physical health, or even their lives – but they are also more susceptible to alcohol marketing.^{28 29} The World Health Organization (WHO) has therefore identified reducing the presence of alcohol cues that can induce craving in people with an alcohol problem as one of the key purposes of marketing restrictions.³⁰

"Until you are in recovery it is hard to understand how important this is. Reducing alcohol advertising could easily help save lives for many in the recovery community."

Person in recovery

The Scottish Government consultation on restricting alcohol marketing

The Scottish Government have published a public consultation on restricting alcohol advertising and promotion in Scotland, which closes on 9 March 2023. They have indicated that legislation will follow within the lifetime of this parliament, depending on the outcome of the consultation. This is an opportunity to put people's right to health before company profits and change how alcohol is marketed and promoted in Scotland by supporting calls for restrictions.

Alcohol Focus Scotland has created a list of [key resources](#) and contacts to support you to respond. Please get in touch with Nicola.Merrin@alcohol-focus-scotland.org.uk if you would like to discuss anything further.

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