

The Impact of Alcohol Marketing on People in Recovery

January 2025

Summary

- People with or in recovery from 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.
- The Scottish Government must bring forward specific proposals on alcohol marketing restrictions with urgency.

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."

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."

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. Surveys, focus groups and interviews with people in recovery have highlighted that marketing can trigger relapse and make it difficult for people to abstain from drinking.^{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 People in recovery have highlighted the marketing of no and low alcohol products as problematic.²¹ For example, 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.²²

"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."

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."

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.²³ People reported negative emotions when viewing alcohol advertisements, including loss, lack of belonging, sadness, guilt and exclusion from the norm.²⁴

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.^{25 26} The retail environment has been identified as especially challenging. A Scottish 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.²⁷ Lived experience reinforces 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.²⁸

Restricting alcohol marketing

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.^{29 30} 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.³¹

"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."

Time for action

In 2022, the **Scottish Government committed to introducing alcohol marketing restrictions within the lifetime of this parliament**, subject to the outcome of consultation.³² The alcohol advertising and promotion consultation closed in March 2023, and now Public Health Scotland have been tasked with conducting an evidence review before any further progress is made on specific proposals.

Restricting alcohol marketing in Scotland offers an opportunity for us to be ambitious and to **put people's right to health before company profits**. The Scottish Government **should bring forward their legislative proposals on alcohol marketing as soon as possible**.

About AFS

[Alcohol Focus Scotland \(AFS\)](#) is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol harm. We want to see fewer people have their health damaged or lives cut short due to alcohol, fewer children and families suffering as a result of other people's drinking, and communities free from alcohol-related crime and violence.

References

- ¹ Casswell, S. et al. (2016). How the alcohol industry relies on harmful use of alcohol and works to protect its profits. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 35(6), 661-664.
- ² Viet Cuong, P. et al. (2018). Cross country comparison of proportion of alcohol consumed in harmful drinking occasions using the International Alcohol Control Study. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 37, S45-S52.
- ³ Bhattacharya, A. et al. (2018). How dependent is the alcohol industry on heavy drinking in England? *Addiction*, 113(12), 2225-2232.
- ⁴ Bhattacharya, A. et al. (2018). How dependent is the alcohol industry on heavy drinking in England? *Addiction*, 113(12), 2225-2232.
- ⁵ Hastings, G. (2009). *"They'll drink bucket loads of the stuff": An analysis of internal alcohol industry advertising documents*. The Alcohol Education and Research Council.
- ⁶ Guillou Landreat, M. et al. (2020). Alcohol use disorders, beverage preferences and the influence of alcohol marketing: a preliminary study. *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy*, 15(90).
- ⁷ Alcohol Health Alliance UK (2021). *No escape: How alcohol advertising preys on children and vulnerable people*.
- ⁸ Focus group with people attending a mutual aid recovery group conducted by We Are With You in Glasgow in February 2022.
- ⁹ Engels, R. C. et al. (2009). Alcohol portrayal on television affects actual drinking behaviour. *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 44(3), 244-249.
- ¹⁰ Courtney, A. L. et al. (2018). Reward system activation in response to alcohol advertisements predicts college drinking. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 79(1), 29-38.
- ¹¹ Field, M. & Cox, W. M. (2008). Attentional bias in addictive behaviors: a review of its development, causes, and consequences. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 97(1-2), 1-20.
- ¹² Field, M. et al. (2007). Experimental manipulation of attentional biases in heavy drinkers: do the effects generalise? *Psychopharmacology*, 192(4), 593-608.
- ¹³ Babor, T. F. et al. (2017). Vulnerability to alcohol-related problems: a policy brief with implications for the regulation of alcohol marketing. *Addiction*, 112, 94-101.
- ¹⁴ Murray, R. et al. (2022). The effect of alcohol marketing on people with, or at risk of, an alcohol problem: A rapid literature review. Alcohol Focus Scotland.
- ¹⁵ Alhabash, S. et al. (2016). Saw it on Facebook, drank it at the bar! Effects of exposure to Facebook alcohol ads on alcohol-related behaviors. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 16(1), 44-58.
- ¹⁶ Witteman, J. et al. (2015). Cue reactivity and its relation to craving and relapse in alcohol dependence: a combined laboratory and field study. *Psychopharmacology*, 232(20), 3685-3696.
- ¹⁷ Stautz, K. et al. (2017). Impact of alcohol-promoting and alcohol-warning advertisements on alcohol consumption, affect, and implicit cognition in heavy drinking young adults: A laboratory-based randomized controlled trial. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 22(1), 128-150.
- ¹⁸ Alcohol Health Alliance UK (2021). *No escape: How alcohol advertising preys on children and vulnerable people*.
- ¹⁹ Alcohol focus Scotland (2023). "In Your Face" - People in recovery's experiences of alcohol marketing. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNTjtGttYE8>
- ²⁰ Alhabash, S. et al. (2016). Saw it on Facebook, drank it at the bar! Effects of exposure to Facebook alcohol ads on alcohol-related behaviors. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 16(1), 44-58.
- ²¹ Alcohol focus Scotland (2023). "In Your Face" - People in recovery's experiences of alcohol marketing. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNTjtGttYE8>
- ²² Focus group with people attending a mutual aid recovery group conducted by We Are With You in Glasgow in February 2022.
- ²³ Treise, D. M. et al. (1995). How recovering alcoholics interpret alcoholic beverage advertising. *Health Marketing Quarterly*, 12(2), 125-139.
- ²⁴ Thomson, A. et al. (1997). A qualitative investigation of the responses of in-treatment and recovering heavy drinkers to alcohol advertising on New Zealand television. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 24(1), 133-146.
- ²⁵ Murray, R. et al. (2022). *The effect of alcohol marketing on people with, or at risk of, an alcohol problem: A rapid literature review*. Alcohol Focus Scotland.
- ²⁶ Focus group with people attending a mutual aid recovery group conducted by We Are With You in Glasgow in February 2022.
- ²⁷ Shortt, N. et al. (2017). Place and recovery from alcohol dependence: A journey through photovoice. *Health and Place*, 47, 147-155.
- ²⁸ Alcohol focus Scotland (2023). "In Your Face" - People in recovery's experiences of alcohol marketing. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNTjtGttYE8>.
- ²⁹ Murray, R. et al. (2022). *The effect of alcohol marketing on people with, or at risk of, an alcohol problem: A rapid literature review*. Alcohol Focus Scotland.
- ³⁰ Babor, T. F. et al. (2017). Vulnerability to alcohol-related problems: a policy brief with implications for the regulation of alcohol marketing. *Addiction*, 112, 94-101.
- ³¹ World Health Organization (2019). *The SAFER technical package: five areas of intervention at national and subnational levels*.
- ³² Scottish Government (2022). *A Stronger & More Resilient Scotland. The Programme for Government 2022-23*.

All quotes featured are from people in recovery from surveys, interviews and focus groups facilitated or supported by AFS.