

Community, Not A Commodity



The LGBT+ Community's Views on Alcohol Marketing



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Introduction

The intersection of alcohol marketing and the LGBT+ community is an important issue that deserves increased attention. Harmful alcohol use is more prevalent among sexual and gender minorities than their cisgender/heterosexual counterparts.[1] In addition, the alcohol industry has increased marketing strategies that are targeted specifically to lesbian and gay communities. This targeted marketing can increase exposure and appeal, potentially leading to higher alcohol consumption within this part of the population.[2]

Purpose of this Report

Alcohol Focus Scotland (AFS) is keen to understand how alcohol marketing impacts different communities and to support people in advocating for change. To explore the specific experiences of LGBT+ individuals, we engaged directly with members of the LGBT+ community to gather insights into how alcohol marketing affects them. This report presents our findings, with the aim of encouraging further dialogue and action to reduce the harmful effects of alcohol marketing.

Methodology

Between October and November 2024, Alcohol Focus Scotland conducted three workshops with 18 members of the LGBT+ community. Participants included LGBT+ adults and young people aged 18–25. These workshops provided a safe space for individuals to share their experiences with alcohol marketing and reflect on its impact on themselves and the LGBT+ community.

Findings

How alcohol companies market their products to the LGBT+ Community

Workshop participants were asked if they had encountered alcohol marketing specifically targeting LGBT+ people, and if so, what marketing tactics they believed were being used.

Superficial Inclusivity and Exploiting LGBT+ Identity/History for Profit

Many participants commented on seeing alcohol companies using the LGBT+ rainbow symbol, or slogans associated with LGBT+ rights, to advertise their products and align their brands with the community. However, many participants felt this representation was both misleading and exploitative.



Rather than supporting genuine progress, they believed these marketing strategies often commodify LGBT+ identity, using it as a tool to drive sales while glossing over the realities of alcohol consumption.

"Companies are trying to paint themselves in a better light... They use it as a way to reinforce their good intentions. And what do we all say when they do that? 'Oh yeah, that's great, good on you.'"

"Yeah, you could put love wins on your lovely little rainbow bottles, but you're not going to show anyone throwing their guts up in the toilet at three in the morning"

"Take the bottle. Yes, slap a rainbow on it, it's done. It's migraine-causing."

Some participants expressed the view that brands aim to exploit the LGBT+ community's history of marginalisation, believing that even superficial gestures of inclusivity will be embraced. They noted that alcohol companies often portray themselves as allies while prioritising profit over meaningful efforts to promote genuine inclusion.

“I feel like we [the LGBT+ Community] are conditioned to see any part of society accepting us as a good thing and as progress. Sometimes my first reaction to seeing [rainbows on products] is to think that it’s nice and inclusive... But when you think about it, their only interest is money, and their target is that whole group.”



“It just shows you how desperate we (the LGBT+ community) are for acceptance because we were demonised for so long.”

Participants also expressed frustration with how historic LGBT+ struggles, particularly the Stonewall Riots, are used in alcohol marketing. The Stonewall Riots were a series of clashes between police and LGBT+ activists, starting outside the Stonewall Inn in New York City in June 1969, which became a catalyst for the modern gay rights movement. The riots were a response to ongoing police brutality and discrimination faced by LGBT+ individuals at the time.

Marketing Spotlight: Stonewall and alcohol branding

Several alcohol brands have incorporated references to the Stonewall Riots into their marketing strategies. For instance:

Stonewall Spirits markets its products as being inspired by the 1969 Stonewall Riots, emphasising a commitment to supporting LGBTQ+ communities through year-round advocacy and donations linked to product sales. [3]

A brewing company has developed a beer in partnership with an LGBTQ+ initiative, highlighting the legacy of the Stonewall Uprising and expressing dedication to creating inclusive spaces and supporting grassroots activism. [4]



While some brands frame their campaigns as acts of solidarity, some participants felt that using Stonewall in marketing campaigns was deeply inappropriate, as it trivialised the historical significance of the event and the ongoing fight for LGBT+ rights. Others questioned whether younger LGBT+ people may be more vulnerable to this type of marketing, as they may not have the same awareness of past struggles.



“The only reason it (LGBT+ representation) is getting better is that the status quo has realised they can monetise any movement that pushes for rights... This is a perfect example of how they cheapen a lot of suffering and efforts. Frankly, it’s insulting.”

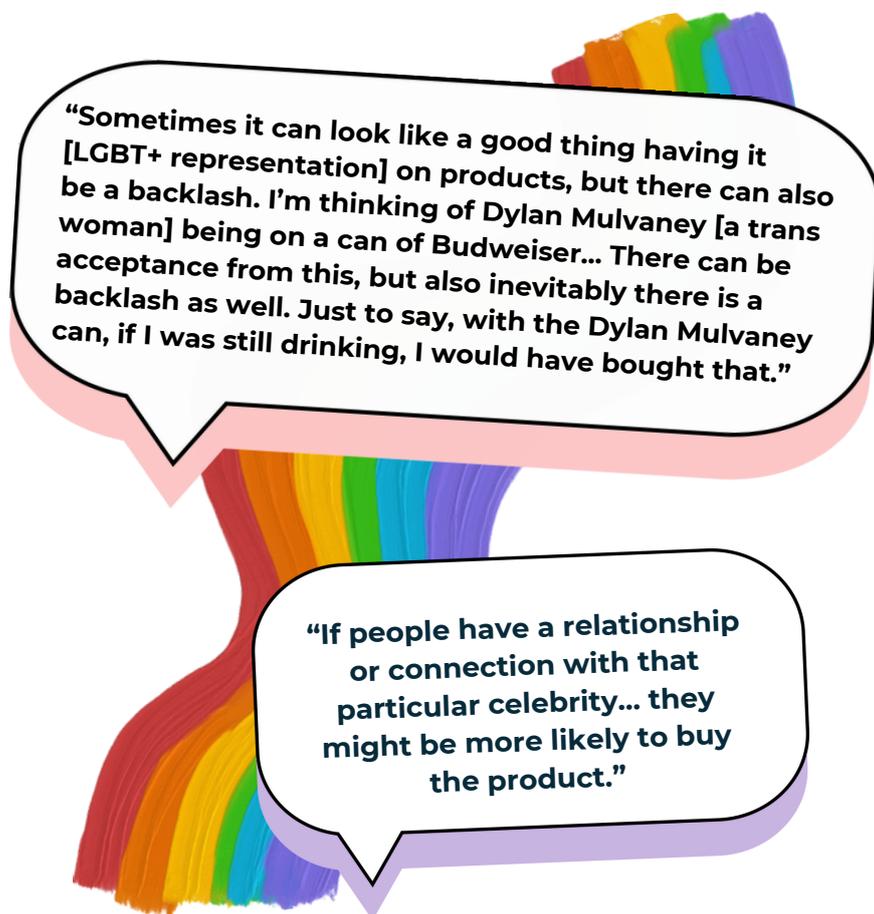
“I wonder if younger members of the community are more vulnerable to this because they don’t remember a time when you got as much abuse.”

“The audacity to make profit off of a violent event.”

The Use of LGBT+ Celebrities and Influencers

Another marketing tactic discussed by participants was the use of LGBT+ celebrities and influencers to promote alcohol brands. Some felt that companies align themselves with well-known LGBT+ figures not out of genuine support for the community, but as a strategic move to increase sales.

One example highlighted was Budweiser’s partnership with Dylan Mulvaney, a trans woman, to promote their products on social media. This collaboration sparked strong opinions, both about its impact on the LGBT+ community and the broader implications of using queer influencers in alcohol marketing.



“Sometimes it can look like a good thing having it [LGBT+ representation] on products, but there can also be a backlash. I’m thinking of Dylan Mulvaney [a trans woman] being on a can of Budweiser... There can be acceptance from this, but also inevitably there is a backlash as well. Just to say, with the Dylan Mulvaney can, if I was still drinking, I would have bought that.”

“If people have a relationship or connection with that particular celebrity... they might be more likely to buy the product.”

CASE STUDY: Corporate allyship or exploitation? The Bud Light/Dylan Mulvaney influencer campaign

In April 2023, Bud Light partnered with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney for a social media campaign featuring her face on a Bud Light can. The apparent aim was to appeal to younger people and increase diversity. As commented by Bud Light's Vice President of Marketing at the time:

"This brand is in decline, it's been in a decline for a really long time, and if we do not attract young drinkers to come and drink this brand there will be no future for Bud Light.....It's like, we need to evolve and elevate this incredibly iconic brand. And my ... what I brought to that was a belief in, okay, what does evolve and elevate mean? It means inclusivity. It means shifting the tone. It means having a campaign that's truly inclusive."^[5]

However, the campaign sparked backlash, particularly from conservative groups calling for a boycott, and some LGBT+ individuals also criticised Bud Light for its weak response to the controversy. Mulvaney expressed frustration over the brand's failure to publicly support her, calling it worse than not hiring a trans person at all.



Reinforcing Social Pressures Through Advertising

Beyond representation, participants also described how alcohol advertising can reinforce harmful social pressures. Many described how marketing creates the illusion that alcohol is essential to social life, particularly within LGBT+ spaces.

For example, they highlighted how adverts that frequently depict groups of happy, confident people drinking together, subtly send the message that alcohol is key to friendship, fun, and self-expression.

It was felt that this type of messaging may be particularly damaging to LGBT+ individuals who have experienced isolation or exclusion.

"If you are lonely and you see some of the adverts with people drinking with pals, it makes it look like 'if you drink you'll get pals.'"

"It makes it look like if you're not drinking alcohol with friends then you're weird."

"If it wasn't for the constant barrage of 'drinking is fun, you need to drink to have friends'... I don't think we would have certain ideas around how we feel about alcohol."

The Idealised Queer Experience: A Marketing Fantasy

Additionally, some participants commented on how alcohol brands romanticise and commercialise the queer experience, portraying an exaggerated and often unrealistic version of LGBT+ life. They felt this type of messaging can create pressure to conform to an idealised image - one where drinking is an inherent part of queer joy and celebration.

Where LGBT people encounter alcohol marketing

Participants were also asked about where and when they encountered alcohol marketing.

Pride and LGBT+ events

In response, many participants commented on seeing alcohol marketing during Pride events and other organised gatherings for the LGBT+ community. Some also reflected on how the LGBT+ community itself might be contributing to the issue by continuing to welcome brands that use Pride and other queer events as marketing opportunities.



"Something that really annoys me about the rainbow advertising is that they always advertise this weirdly glorified fantasy version of the queer lifestyle... It makes it feel like if you don't have our product, you'll be sad and alone."

"It is offensive to suggest we should express our pride by getting blackout drunk."



"Pride has become such a thing now for it [alcohol marketing]."

"I see a lot of stuff for Absolut Vodka during queer events. I remember clearly their vodka having a rainbow flag on it."

"People just view Pride as a big glittery p*ss up."

"I think even the community do this as well, like at Pride events, and when they are organising, they will talk about all these companies who have come forward and want to be involved. These companies will try and sell themselves as inclusive companies".

LGBT+ Spaces / Venues

Participants also spoke about the prevalence of alcohol in LGBT+ spaces, describing it as both unavoidable and problematic.

In particular, many expressed frustration with the pervasive alcohol advertising in licensed LGBT+ venues, noting that whether or not someone intended to buy or drink alcohol, they were still exposed to alcohol marketing.

At the same time, licensed venues were seen as offering a place where LGBT+ individuals could meet others and safely express their identities - sometimes as part of structured LGBT+ groups. However, the reliance on alcohol-focused venues raises concerns about the lack of inclusive, alcohol-free spaces where people can socialise without feeling pressured or surrounded by drinking culture.

Furthermore, some participants highlighted the prevalence of alcohol promotions in LGBT+ licensed venues, noting that cheap drink deals, competitions, and giveaways were common. They expressed concerns that these marketing tactics could encourage excessive drinking by making alcohol more accessible and appealing in social settings.

Alcohol Marketing Beyond LGBT+ Spaces

While many participants focused on alcohol marketing within LGBT+ spaces and events, some also described encountering it in other areas of their lives, highlighting how different aspects of identities and experiences can potentially intersect to shape marketing exposure. For example, one participant noted that student life and their LGBT+ identity combined to create an environment where alcohol marketing was inescapable.

Beyond physical spaces, participants also described how alcohol marketing was prevalent in TV, films, and other forms of media. Some highlighted how alcohol was often depicted as a coping mechanism, reinforcing problematic associations between drinking and mental health. This messaging could have particular implications for the LGBT+ community as there is evidence that some LGBT+ people use alcohol to give some temporary relief from mental health difficulties [6], and LGBT+ Britons are more likely to experience mental health problems than the general population.[7]

"Queer spaces are just so alcohol focused and it's a huge problem."

"A good handful of the Monday group go to [the LGBT+ bar] and even if you don't drink, you can't avoid being surrounded by alcohol advertising and branding. They don't give you a choice."

"There were always promotions on for cheap drinks. There would be people handing out cheap drinks, competitions, t-shirts, that kind of stuff. Particularly in the gay bars."

"The only thing that would impact me with regards to alcohol marketing is if I went to a club night and there was a brand there giving away stuff. You would just end up buying hunders of stuff."



"Being gay during Freshers Fest is really bad for alcohol advertisements."

"In any media where someone could be shown to be having a really bad time with their life - eight times out of 10, they're having a wine or something... associating alcoholism with bad mental health."

Conclusions and recommendations

The intersection of alcohol marketing and the LGBT+ community raises significant concerns about the impact of targeted advertising on a population that already experiences higher rates of harmful alcohol use.

Workshop participants expressed frustration with the superficial inclusivity of alcohol brands, which often commodify LGBT+ identity without making meaningful efforts to address the challenges the community continues to face. They felt that the misuse of historical events, such as the Stonewall Riots, in marketing campaigns further trivialises these serious issues. Moreover, the normalisation of alcohol consumption in LGBT+ spaces and events was held to perpetuate social pressures, leading to the perception that drinking is integral to the queer experience.

This report emphasises the need for meaningful dialogue and action to mitigate the harmful effects of alcohol marketing on the LGBT+ community. Participants proposed a range of suggestions for change, some were aimed at decision-makers regarding regulatory measures, while others focused on actions the LGBT+ community could take to address these issues.

Regulatory Changes

Decision-makers should implement regulations to reduce the impact of alcohol marketing, especially on vulnerable populations. Key suggestions from participants included limiting alcohol advertising, particularly during times and in spaces where young people are likely to be present, to prevent early exposure to such messaging. Some called for a complete ban on alcohol advertising.

Participants also advocated for less appealing packaging designs.

“Make it all black; this would make it less tempting”

“I would discourage rainbow advertising as much as possible.”

“Ban all advertising for health-harming products.... don’t brainwash us into drinking.”

“[Only] advertise alcohol after a certain time... That might make children see it less.”

Community Action



The participants' comments clearly indicated that the LGBT+ community has a crucial role to play in addressing the influence of alcohol brands within its spaces and events.

It is important for community members to critically assess the presence of alcohol brands at Pride events and foster discussions about the potential harms of alcohol. Additionally, ensuring the availability of alcohol-free spaces is vital to creating inclusive environments where people can gather without the pressure to consume alcohol.

As one participant noted, “They're not going to stop as long as they can get away with it!”, underscoring the need for greater awareness of brand exploitation of LGBT+ identities and action to address it.

Further research is needed to better understand the experiences, views, and needs of LGBT+ people in relation to alcohol and alcohol marketing. Future research should be inclusive and developed in collaboration with LGBT+ groups to reflect the diversity of the community and support more effective policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

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