



## AUSTRALIAN TEENAGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ALCOHOL ADVERTISING: COMPLIANCE WITH REGULATORY CODES

**Authors:** Alexandra Aiken, Tina Lam, Lucinda Burns, Tanya Chikritzhs, William Gilmore, Simon Lenton, Belinda Lloyd, Daniel Lubman, Rowan Ogeil, Richard Mattick and Steve Allsop

Heavy or risky alcohol use has been argued to be a major contributor to the burden of disease internationally [1]. Preventive efforts are countered by sophisticated and well-funded advertising and marketing campaigns [2, 3]. There is a body of research indicating that amongst young people exposure to alcohol advertising is associated with increased positive beliefs about alcohol, intentions to drink, likelihood of underage drinking, and increased level of consumption [4-9].

Despite concerns about the effectiveness of current regulatory systems [10, 11], there are only a small number of studies in Australia and internationally assessing compliance with alcohol advertising codes. These studies suggest alcohol marketing regularly breaches relevant codes, particularly in regards to

their appeal to children and adolescents [12-18]. Internationally, systems of regulation generally include that advertising should not appeal to children or adolescents (<18 years of age) and the Australian code specifies that any actors appearing in alcohol adverts 'must be over 25 years and clearly depicted as adults' [19]. This study interprets the requirement of the use of actors over the age of 25, as intending to remove any ambiguity around whether the character is under or over the Australian purchase age of 18.

Young peoples' perspectives on alcohol advertising are infrequently investigated. This study examined compliance with the relevant advertising codes, as perceived by 16-19 year old heavy alcohol users.

## How were the data collected?

This study uses data from the Young Australians Alcohol Reporting System (YAARS), which surveyed 16-19 year old heavy alcohol users from Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Bunbury in Western Australia.

Three hundred and fifty-one 16-19 year olds were purposively sampled from the top 20-25% of alcohol users in this age group (they drank 7 or more standard drinks at least twice a month - 11 or more for 18-19 year old males). This group was targeted in light of recent evidence that suggests that alcohol use and related harms are increasing amongst the heaviest drinkers [20].

This study is not representative of all 16-19 year old heavy drinkers. However, this sample reported similar rates of high risk drinking (11+ standard drinks at least twice monthly) to age-matched heavy drinkers recruited using representative sampling techniques [21, 22].

All participants completed an initial face-to-face interview and a subsample of 68 participants also completed an in-depth qualitative interview which included responding to 6 recent alcohol ads (these participants must have consumed 11+ standard drinks on their last drinking occasion). Two of the ads shown to participants were for beers, one for a liqueur, an apple cider, a whisky and a wine product.

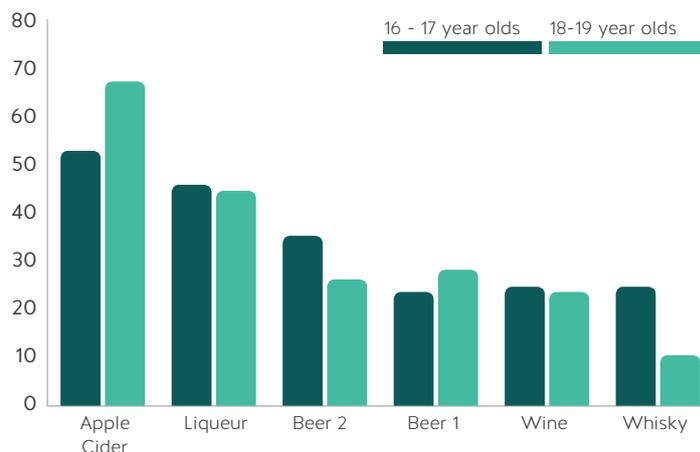
**Three hundred and fifty-one 16-19 year old heavy alcohol users were purposively sampled from the top 20-25% of alcohol users in this age group**

**All participants completed an initial face-to-face interview and a subsample of 68 participants also completed an in-depth qualitative interview which included responding to 6 recent alcohol ads**

# Appeal of alcohol advertising to teenagers

Two of the six adverts were more appealing to the 16-19 year old subsample (n=68); 58% indicated that the apple cider advert was 'very' or 'quite' appealing and 44% percent found the liqueur advert similarly appealing.

**The apple cider advert appealed to 58% and the liqueur advert to 44% of participants in the subsample.**



**Figure 1.** Proportion of 16 to 17 and 18 to 19-year-olds in the interview subsample (n=68) reporting that the adverts were 'very' or 'quite' appealing.

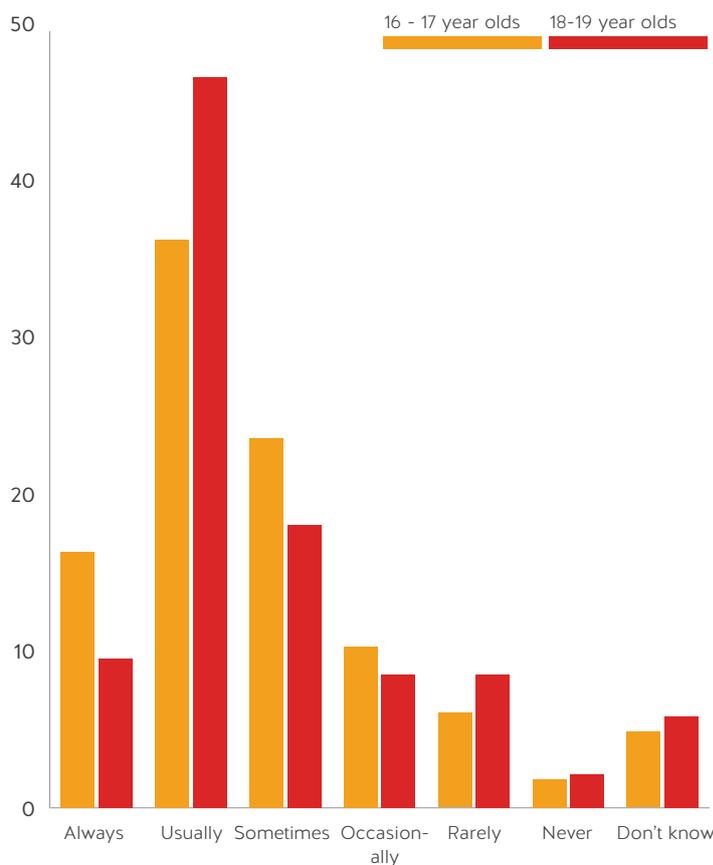
# Apparent age of actors in alcohol advertising

Codes of advertising generally require actors be over 25 years of age and to be clearly depicted as adults (>18 years). The subsample (n=68) was asked to judge how old the main character in the six alcohol adverts appeared to be. Characters were rated as appearing under 25 years of age, 94.5% of the time in the liqueur advert and almost one quarter of the time in the apple cider advert. Furthermore, the liqueur character was perceived as under the age of 18 by 2% of the respondents, and as aged 18 or under by 10% of the respondents.

The majority of the full face-to-face interview sample (n=351) reported that actors in alcohol advertising 'always' or 'usually' appeared to be under 25 years (55%) and a further 20.8% thought that they sometimes did. The responses were similar

The Australian code of advertising requires actors be over 25 years of age and to be clearly depicted as adults. 95% of the participants rated the female in the liqueur advert, and almost one quarter of the males in the apple cider advert as appearing to be younger than 25 years of age.

The majority of the face-to-face interview sample reported that actors in alcohol advertising 'always' or 'usually' appeared to be under 25 years (55%).



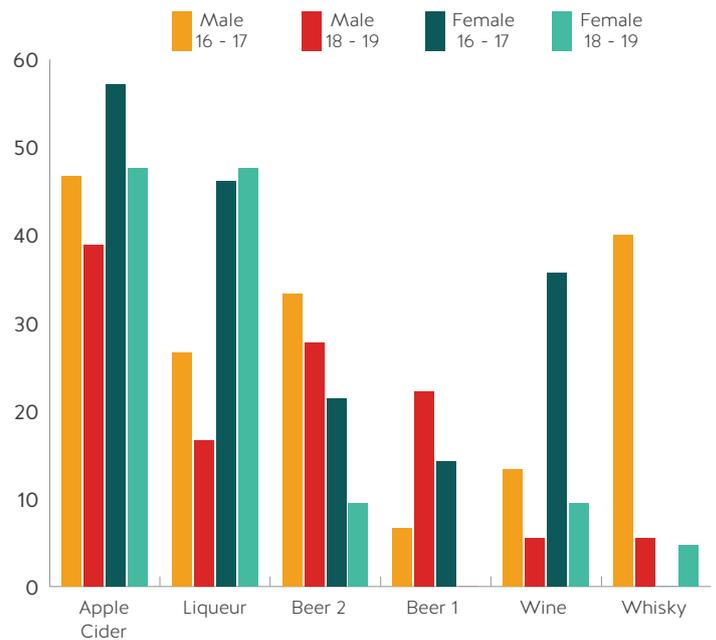
**Figure 2.** How often do actors or characters in alcohol advertising appear to be under 25 years of age? Comparison of responses from 16-17 and 18-19 year olds (n=68).

# Impact of alcohol adverts on intention to use advertised products

More young people in the subsample (n=68) reported wanting to try the apple cider and liqueur 'quite a lot' or 'very much', compared with the other products. Similar proportions of 16-17 and 18-19 year old males and females reported wanting to try the apple cider, while the liqueur was more popular with females than males, as shown in Figure 3.

While most participants did not report strong desire to try the wine or the whisky products, 35.7% of 16-17 year old females reported wanting to try the wine and 40% of 16-17 year old males reported wanting to try the whisky.

More young people reported wanting to try the apple cider and liqueur 'quite a lot' or 'very much', compared with the other products.



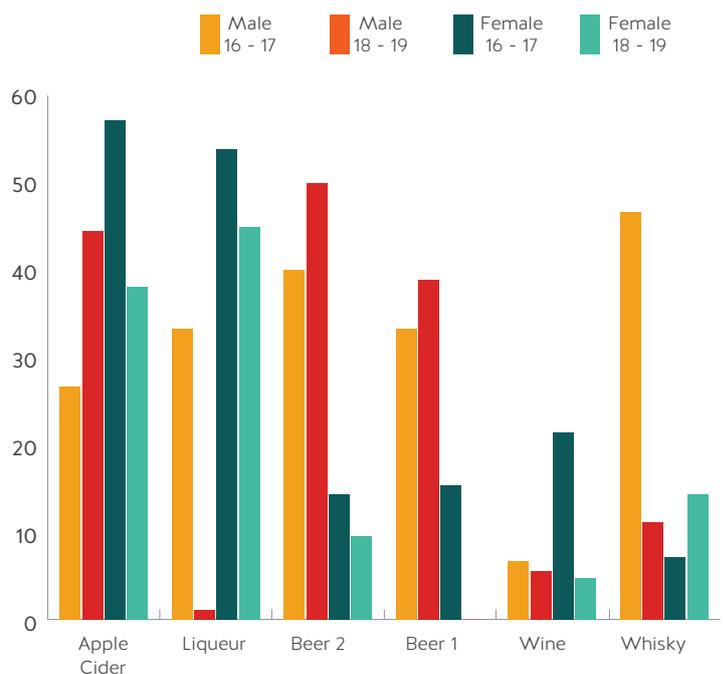
**Figure 3.** Proportion of 16-17 and 18-19 year old males and females (n=68) reporting that the adverts made them want to try the advertised product 'quite a lot' or 'very much'.

# Impact of alcohol adverts on purchasing intentions

When asked how much they wanted to purchase the products based on the adverts, the participants (n=68) again endorsed the apple cider and the liqueur, with 41% and 35% respectively reporting they wanted to purchase these products 'quite a lot' or 'very much'.

As shown in Figure 4, greater proportions of males reported wanting to purchase the beers while more females reported wanting to purchase the liqueur. Again, the whisky had greater appeal to the 16-17 year old males, with 46.7% reporting wanting to purchase this product. The extent to which respondents' preexisting beliefs influenced these preferences was unclear.

When asked how much they wanted to purchase the products based on the adverts, young people again endorsed the apple cider and the liqueur, with 41% and 35% respectively reporting they wanted to purchase these products 'quite a lot' or 'very much'.



**Figure 4.** Proportion of 16-17 and 18-19 year old males and females reporting that the adverts made them want to purchase the advertised product 'quite a lot' or 'very much'.

# Perceived target market of alcohol advertisements

Almost 70% of subsample (n=68) thought that the advert for the liqueur was marketed to people under 25 years of age and of these, almost 30% thought that it was targeted at people under the age of 18 years. Similarly 40% thought that the apple cider advert was aimed at people under 25 years. Few participants reported that the other adverts were aimed at people less than 25 years. Qualitative responses to the ads give some insight into which ads appealed to different groups.

Almost 70% of participants (n=68) thought that the advert for the liqueur was marketed to people under 25 years of age and of these, almost 30% thought that it was targeted at people under the age of 18 years.

## Discussion

A range of typical print adverts across a range of alcohol types was shown to a sample of Australian teenagers. Young people showed a preference for the apple cider and the liqueur adverts, reporting that these adverts were appealing, and that the advert made them want to try and to purchase these products more often than for the other advertised products. The actors in these adverts were more often rated as appearing to be under 25 years of age and large proportions of young people indicated that they thought these adverts were marketed at people less than 25 years. The other four adverts shown were endorsed less frequently, but still appealed to smaller proportions of the sample.

The liqueur and apple cider adverts contain features that have been shown to appeal to adolescents, including colour, humour and youthful characters [23]. The advertised products themselves are sweetened alcoholic beverages that are popular with young people [21, 24].

The advertising techniques are effective in engaging with this group of alcohol-using teenagers, as seen by the high ratings of appeal and intentions to use. Further research is required

Young people showed a preference for the apple cider and the liqueur adverts, reporting that these adverts were appealing, and that the advert made them want to try and to purchase these products more often than for the other advertised products.

The liqueur was associated with being young, feminine, partying, attractive and fashionable, and the apple cider was associated with being young, relaxation, good times and fun. Both were perceived as tasting good. The whisky was seen as appealing to older males, and was associated with being mature, sophisticated and wealthy, which may explain the appeal to the underage males in this study.

to establish whether these findings are due to the nature of the promotion, the nature of the product or a combination of both.

Focused examination of the perceptions of the subsample of 68 participants in this study showed that some alcohol ads directly appeal to young people and impact on their intentions to try and to purchase advertised products.

This study, together with previous research, demonstrates apparent ambiguity in the actors used in promotions: irrespective of intent, ads are directly appealing to heavy drinking adolescents, use actors who are perceived as quite young and are seen as being marketed towards young adults [12-18].

Alcohol products are sometimes marketed in a way that, irrespective of intent, directly appeals to adolescents, raising questions about the effectiveness of current regulatory codes in protecting young people from exposure to alcohol promotions.

---

**Suggested citation for this bulletin:** Aiken A, Lam T, Burns L, Chikritzhs T, Gilmore W, Lenton S, Lloyd B, Lubman D, Ogeil R, Mattick R, Allsop S (2018) 'Australian teenagers' perceptions of alcohol advertising: compliance with regulatory codes'. National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia. See [ndri.curtin.edu.au/research/yaars/bulletins](http://ndri.curtin.edu.au/research/yaars/bulletins) for this bulletin's reference list. **This bulletin is based on:** Aiken A, Lam T, Gilmore W, Burns L, Chikritzhs T, Lenton S, Lloyd B, Lubman D, Ogeil R, Allsop S (2018). Youth perceptions of alcohol advertising: Are current advertising regulations working? Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health.

**For further information** please contact Professor Steve Allsop at the National Drug research Institute on 61 8 9266 1600 or [s.allsop@curtin.edu.au](mailto:s.allsop@curtin.edu.au). The Young Australians Alcohol Reporting System is a project led by the National Drug Research Institute (NDRI; Curtin University), in collaboration with their partners the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC; University of New South Wales), Eastern Health Clinical School (Monash University and Turning Point) and St John of God Hospital (Bunbury). The project is funded by the Australian National Preventative Health Agency. NDRI and NDARC are supported by funding from the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvement Grants Fund.