

# Gendered alcohol brand marketing in a changing world

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**SHAAP/SARN 'Alcohol Occasional' Seminar  
Tuesday 20 June 2023, hosted on Zoom**

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems ([SHAAP](http://www.shaap.org.uk)) and the Scottish Alcohol Research Network ([SARN](http://www.sarn.ac.uk)) are proud to host our Alcohol Occasionals seminar series, which showcases new and innovative research on alcohol. These events provide the chance for researchers, healthcare professionals, policy makers, and members of the public to hear about alcohol-related topics and discuss and debate implications for policy and practice. The theme for 2023 is 'Alcohol in a changing world'. Our [event reports](#) aim to capture the main discussion points and communicate these to a wider audience. SHAAP is responsible for the contents of this report, which is our interpretation.

## Introduction

There were no Conflicts of Interest to declare. The project was funded by the Economic and Social research council, and is titled: 'A Qualitative study exploring the nature, influence, creation and regulation of gendered and sexualised alcohol brand and venue marketing in the age of contemporary feminism(s) and social justice activism'.

## Why is Gender important to the study of drinking culture?

Alcohol policy may be gender blind, but drinking practices and cultures are not, hence it is important to study how gender relates to drinking culture.

There is a narrowing of the gender gap in alcohol use and related harms. This is caused by; changing social positions of women (including increased purchasing power), female targeted alcohol marketing, 'feminisation' of the night time environment, and the increased availability and affordability of alcohol.

Women also often receive mixed messages surrounding their drinking;

- Encouraged to drink through social norms and commercial messaging
- Judged more for transgressing gender expectations
- Told to be responsible for own drinking and safety by industry and (to some extent) policy
- Told to reduce drinking to reduce health arms (e.g. breast cancer) by public health and policy

Public health messages are often drowned out by commercial messaging. Alcohol marketing has significant impact, and it still uses gendered means (i.e. promoting certain stereotypes). Furthermore, commercial night life spaces are gendered, and whilst there exists equal access to drinking spaces, there still exist sexual inequalities (i.e. prevalence of unwanted sexual attention). In recent years there has been an increased awareness of such issues.

The UK has self-regulation of alcohol marketing, and there are longstanding codes regarding alcohol advertising in relation to sex and gender. Around 5 years ago, the advertising standards association introduced a range of



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new codes relating to gender. Adverts should not, for example, include negative gender stereotypes, or mock people for not conforming to gender.

## Research questions:

- 1 How are women targeted and represented in alcohol brand and venue marketing?
- 2 How are femininities and sexualities constructed to promote alcohol use?
- 3 How are gender stereotypes reproduced and/or challenged to encourage alcohol use?
- 4 To what extent are sexualisation and objectification used to promote brands and venues?
- 5 How have alcohol brands responded to increased visibility of feminism, gender equality and other social justice issues?

The Research further wanted to determine the influence and role alcohol brand and venue marketing have on; Gender and sexual identity making, experience of drinking and inequalities in drinking culture.

## Methodology

Stage 1:

- Analysis of marketing posts of 20 alcohol brands on social media (N=2525), including marketing posts during the first UK lockdown (N=850)
- Analysis of 20 nightlife venue marketing posts (N=10,000) on Facebook and Instagram
- Analysis of depictions of alcohol in women's magazine (N=20)
- Analysis of ASA (N=84) and Portman group complaints (N=110)

Stage 2:

- Group (n=27) and individual interviews (n=78) with friendship groups of women, men and other gender identities (aged 17-40) with N=203 participants overall. The study aimed to select a diverse group of participants to ensure a wide range of perspectives
- The project also included a collaborative arts based workshop

Stage 3:

- Interviews with those working in brand venue marketing, including; Brand marketers (n=23), 'Influencers' (n=4), venues (n=16), sexualised marketing roles (e.g. hostesses) (n=12), nightlife photographer (n=1), regulation (n=4)
- It is recognised that the sample of private industry actors who chose to engage with the report may not be representative of the industry as a whole.

## Women and femininity in alcohol brand marketing

Marketing had influence through being relatable and appealing:

- To values and lifestyles associated with; Girly femininities, Feminist

identities, Empowered identities and Queer identities

- By perpetuating and challenging gender stereotypes/roles/expectations
- To social issues that relate to these identities

By reinforcing gendered and positive social norms, association and beliefs

This can lead to; First time purchasing, brand switching, brand loyalty or brand avoidance.

Critical thinking may protect against gendered messaging.

## Pinking of brands and venues: just a colour?

Consumer perspectives:

- Some unapologetically consumed these products and saw it as an expression of femininity, though some felt a sense of embarrassment, as though they had 'fallen for' the marketing
- Some identified as 'girly' but found the marketing to be infantilising
- Some hated such marketing and felt that it reinforced negative gender stereotypes. They expressed that it may make them avoid such products.
- There was also a group who wanted to 'reclaim pink' and make it compatible with their feminism. Some de-gendered pink saying: 'It's just a colour'

Overall the report concludes that pink is not just a colour- there is symbolic meaning attached for many women.

Marketers' perspectives

- Many were critical of such marketing and felt they wanted to dissociate their brand from it, as it was seen as 'tacky'. There was an impression that clients liked this marketing, as it was seen as 'safe', and an easy way to target women.

## Female friendship and bonding

The emphasis on friendship was not seen as being prevalent in male marketing but it plays a significant role in female-targeted marketing.

Consumer perspectives:

- Women were least critical of this form of marketing and it was seen as being relatable/appealing
- It could also be exclusionary and play into 'FOMO' (Fear of missing out) and this could impact non-drinkers and 'problematic drinkers'

Marketers' perspectives:

- It was suggested that it was important to draw on the positive associations of social drinking
- Some suggested that it was 'best-practice', as to promote drinking alone would be problematic under regulatory codes
- There was a suggestion from influencers that some brands wish to draw on a feeling of 'FOMO'

## Appearance and consumer based femininity.

There is often a focus on stereotypical forms of femininity. There is also a trend of increased diversity over time in marketing

Consumer perspectives:

- Many women found this to be very relatable, and they felt a sense of empowerment
- It was suggested that such marketing was outdated, and could be seen as exclusionary to queer women

This focus on appearance overlapped with the topic of calorie labels. There have been increased calls from health lobbies to include calorie information on labels to promote consumer choice. Many brands, however, have already been doing this as a form of marketing to target women. On the other hand, there was also a counter-narrative from some brands which promoted indulgence and a rejection of diet culture (e.g. Baileys).

## Consumer views:

- Marketing focused on 'low calorie' was widely rejected by women, many of whom felt it impacted the pleasure that they felt from having a drink. It was also suggested that it played off of people's insecurities.

## Marketers' views:

- All marketers were happy to have calories on their product. Some framed it as best practice, and in many ways it aligns with their narrative of individual responsibility.
- There was an awareness that the issue is no longer as gendered- there is an increasing focus in targeting men with such products.

### Managing busy (working) lives and multiple roles

Alcohol is presented as a reward and a way of coping with the stresses of working life, motherhood, etc.

## Consumer views:

- Many found this relatable
- There was awareness of the stereotypes of 'mummy wine' culture.
- There was nevertheless criticism of this: it was recognised that it is problematic to be presenting alcohol as a method of managing stress.

## Marketer's views:

- Whilst some described this as a 'relatable hook', overall there was criticism of this approach. Many saw it as 'tacky'. Furthermore, it was suggested that the use of such marketing is a 'grey area' in advertising regulations.

### Does sex still sell?

## Marketers:

- The move away from sexualised marketing was seen as positive; it was suggested that they had an ethical responsibility to 'behave properly'.

This has arguably been replaced by 'social cause marketing'. Some brands will endorse feminist and progressive causes (although without explicitly using the word feminism) as part of their marketing. This can involve marketing using a transgression of usual gender norms.

## Marketer's views:

- It was suggested that this was an opportunity to promote social change. It was also recognised that there are economic benefits to such marketing.

## Consumer views:

- Some felt positive towards such marketing, expressing that it can be used as a vessel for social change
- In contrast, many feminist women felt that it was 'T-shirt feminism' and that the use of such social causes for profit making dilutes the message.
- Some took issue with the suggestion that drinking is empowering; in their experience they had gained empowerment when they stopped drinking

### Moving Beyond the Cisheteronormative

This takes many forms; the commodification of pride, collaborations with LGBTQ+ charities/ influencers, etc.

## Consumer views:

- Some saw it as a form of visibility and felt that it could promote acceptance
- Overall, there was criticism of such marketing, and it was seen as 'rainbow washing'.
- Some also felt that alcohol did not match the cause when it came to LGBTQ+/ pride marketing, as alcohol disproportionately harms the LGBTQ+ community, hence the use of such marketing was seen as contradictory to the cause of promoting their rights.

## Marketer's views:

- It was acknowledged that many brands jump from one cause to the next. It was understood that such advertising could be risky, and may alienate certain audience members, but that it can appeal to a younger audience.

### Conclusion

Brands use a mix of traditional and progressive gender messaging to market towards women.

There has been positive change, in the sense that there is a move away from objectification and towards gender and sexual equality. Whilst this may be positive for equality, it is less so for health. Indeed, alcohol contributes towards gender and sexuality inequalities itself.

There is significant understanding of the dynamics at play amongst consumers, and this critical thinking can help resistance towards such messaging.

### Q&A and discussion

There was a discussion of 'brand avoidance' and how industries assess the risk of losing customers versus customers gained from their marketing campaigns. Dr Atkinson suggested that the way in which alcohol companies weigh up such risks varies depending on the size of the brand and the organisation.

Dr Atkinson was also asked if she thought there were parallels to previous forms of marketing that the tobacco industry had employed to target the female audience. Dr Atkinson suggested that here were many similarities, and that many marketers were worried that alcohol regulation could go the same way as tobacco.

### Watch this seminar

Watch the full event recording [here](#)

