

# Team colors on cans change perceptions of alcohol risks, study finds

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Underage and heavy drinking on college campuses continue to be issues for college administrators. While some campuses, such as the University of Missouri, have made strides in efforts to reduce heavy drinking on campus, administrators are continually trying to educate students about the risks of excessive drinking. Now, two MU psychologists have found that students who viewed images of beer cans packaged and displayed in university colors believed that drinking beer was less dangerous than those students who saw images of regular beer cans.

"In this research, we wanted to determine if certain marketing strategies had an effect on whether individuals felt that a certain behavior – in this case, [drinking](#) beer – was more or less dangerous," said Chris Loersch, a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Psychological Sciences in the MU College of Arts and Science. "We found that when people identify themselves with a certain group, such as a college or university, and if that group 'endorses' a product, people assume the product is safe."

According to Loersch, previous studies had investigated how belonging to social groups can affect the behaviors or perceptions of individuals. Loersch said that groups can be close-knit, such as family relationships, or they can be broader, such as individuals who all attend the same university. In either case, people tend to feel a sense of trust and safety within their own groups, or what psychologists call "ingroups."

In the study, Loersch and Bruce Bartholow, associate professor of psychological sciences at MU, found that undergraduate participants

who were briefly exposed to beer packaged in MU colors perceived beer drinking as safer than did participants who had seen images of standard beer cans. These feelings of safety existed even when participants were subliminally exposed to the word "beer," providing evidence that the fan cans affect people's unconscious responses toward beer. Loersch said that this research did not investigate whether this change affected actual drinking behavior.

"Previous research has consistently demonstrated that people view members of their social groups as trustworthy and safe," Loersch said. "Our research indicates that this sense of interpersonal safety for ingroup members appears to extend to a product that, via its packaging, conveys cues for group affiliation. These results are important given that alcohol consumption is associated with unsafe behavior, often leading to increases in risk-taking, aggressiveness and likelihood of serious injury."

In the research, Loersch and Bartholow conducted three experiments. University of Missouri students were randomly assigned to view either a standard beer can or a fan can with MU colors along with other beverages. Participants in the first experiment rated beer consumption as less dangerous after having seen the fan can compared to the regular beer can. In the second experiment, participants who first saw the fan can were faster to recognize words indicating safety, and slower to recognize words indicating danger, than were participants who first saw a regular beer can. In the third experiment, participants who saw a fan can rated the local social scene as less dangerous compared to participants who saw a regular [beer](#) can or a bottle of water presented in university colors.

"Evidence-based prevention strategies focus on helping students accurately assess the risks associated with drinking," said Susan O'Neill, a psychologist with the MU Student Health Center. "Marketing campaigns that alter drinkers' perceptions of alcohol's potential risks --

particularly at an automatic or unconscious level -- have no place in college communities. Challenging the aggressive promotion of drinking, whether by campus social groups or national corporations, is important to create a campus culture that encourages responsible drinking."

**More information:** The study was published recently in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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