

Study reveals impact of alcohol packaging on young people

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New research from the University of Stirling has highlighted the

significant impact that alcohol packaging has on capturing the attention of, and creating appeal amongst, young people.

The study—published in the *Journal for Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*—also found that packaging helps shape perceptions of the product, drinker and drinking experience.

Led by Daniel Jones, of the Institute for Social Marketing and Health (ISMH) at Stirling, the research addresses a gap in knowledge—with previous studies having typically focused on traditional and digital [alcohol](#) marketing, rather than packaging itself.

The findings provide pause for thought about the contrast between unrestricted designs in alcohol packaging, and the [plain packaging](#) legal requirements for cigarettes. Further research should consider potential benefits of stronger regulation of alcohol packaging and labeling, as well as [public support](#) for such changes, the researchers say.

The new study sought to explore how [young adults](#), aged between 18 and 35, viewed and engaged with alcohol packaging. Fifty current drinkers, from Scotland, participated in eight focus groups in which they were shown, allowed to handle, and asked about a range of alcoholic products.

"We found that, for young adult drinkers in Scotland, alcohol packaging can capture attention, create appeal, and help shape perceptions of the product, drinker and drinking experience," Jones said. "Five main themes emerged from our data: the ubiquity of alcohol packaging; its appeal and ability to catch attention; its association with particular occasions and activities; its ability to inform perceptions; and its engagement of both visual and non-visual senses—taste, touch, sound and smell."

Participants discussed seeing alcohol packaging in different

settings—typically shops and drinking venues—and via marketing, particularly advertising. They frequently recalled seeing it featured in the media—with most reporting exposure on television, in movies, on social media and the internet.

Most recalled packs that stood out in shops were considered appealing for being different, interesting, or aesthetically pleasing. Notably, some participants reported purchasing alcohol products solely on pack appeal, with one saying: "I don't actually like beer, but I bought it specifically because I liked the packaging."

Packaging design—such as colors and graphics—is central to appeal, as is structure, with most participants drawn to sleek or distinctive shapes. Size of packs was also said to be important, for example, larger packs were considered more cost-effective and preferable when intending to consume a large quantity of alcohol. Smaller 'grab and go' packs were thought to enable and encourage consumption in public settings, such as on trains or at concerts, and help avoid unwanted attention from police and security. One participant said: "I think it would be easier to hide that you were drinking."

On-pack promotions—such as gifts and prizes—contributed to appeal, as did sponsorships, for example those linked to sports, festivals, and television shows. Meanwhile, most felt that price marks on packaging were indicative of inferior products. Limited edition packs were considered eye-catching and seen as an incentive by several participants, thought to encourage trial, collection, and upcycling—with most having retained expensive or "cool" empty bottles for display or collection.

All groups frequently associated packaging with specific occasions and activities—such as Smirnoff and Gordon's for socializing and nights out; Budweiser for watching football at home and at parties; and Strongbow and Blossom Hill for festivals, outdoor drinking, or drinking before

going out.

Most participants were clear about who was being targeted by the packaging and which products were appropriate for different ages and genders. Several used pack appearance as an indicator for taste and palatability—expecting certain drinks to be fruity, light, or refreshing due to the design of the packaging.

Encouraging purchase

Mr Jones said: "Our study demonstrates that the packaging of alcohol products is an important marketing communications vehicle, as it is for other fast-moving consumer goods. It can elicit expectations, influence purchasing decisions, and encourage purchase. As expressed by participants, alcohol packaging conveys messages of consumer-product suitability and acceptability, creating enduring brand impressions and reinforcing the perception that alcohol is a desirable product via pack structure, graphics, and promotions.

"Previous studies have suggested that including prominent warnings on packs could reduce appeal and increase awareness of alcohol-related risks and support a decrease in consumption; however, there's a dearth of research around the significant promotional role of packaging, and how it may be better regulated, as attractive features may limit the effectiveness of warnings.

"The significant promotional role of packaging requires further consideration, as attractive features may limit the effectiveness of warnings."

Improving labeling

Alison Douglas, Chief Executive of Alcohol Focus Scotland, said: "This research shows how packaging is an integral part of the marketing mix, used by alcohol producers to promote their brands and make drinking appealing. To turn the tide of alcohol-related harm we need to introduce measures to restrict and regulate all forms of alcohol marketing, in line with World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations. Mandating health warnings on alcohol products would help to counter the attractiveness of [packaging](#) and address current low levels of knowledge of alcohol harm.

"The Scottish Government have already committed to a consultation on alcohol marketing, expected later this year. We hope to see comprehensive restrictions introduced which include improving alcohol labeling."

More information: Daniel Jones et al, Alcohol Packaging As a Promotional Tool: A Focus Group Study With Young Adult Drinkers in Scotland, *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (2022). [DOI: 10.15288/jsad.2022.83.565](#)

Provided by University of Stirling

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