

Episode 4: 'Alcohol Marketing Survey'

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley (Scottish Families)

Guest Speakers: Susie McClue (Scottish Families), Gemma and Simon (Alcohol Focus Scotland), Louise (Alcohol and Drugs Support South West Scotland), Beverly and Olivia

Introduction:

This is episode four, the 'alcohol marketing survey' with members from the Scottish Families Alcohol Action Group.

Interview Begins

Rebecca:

So we can start it off just saying an introduction about the alcohol marketing survey that we've been looking at for the past year and Susie if you can lead on from the findings of the first alcohol marketing survey.

Susie:

Yeah, sure. I thought I might just start by telling you what the purpose of the survey was, just to give people a sense of why we were doing it in the first place.

So we wanted to understand how widely spread alcohol messages are in everyday life. And then we did that by asking different things like what references to alcohol did you notice today, we then asked people to put those references into categories. We asked if people took photos, I don't think we got many photos. We asked if this was the first time people had noticed where alcohol is present in their community. We asked for people's reflections on what they saw. We asked when they carried the survey out, so people sort of were encouraged to carry it out at a certain point in the day. People were asked to set aside a day and a time to make a note of where alcohol is present in your day. You could chose a full day or maybe a few hours whilst doing what you would normally be doing.

So it's just a sense of like, what's around me, in my own environment, throughout the normal course of a day. So not going out to look to try and find the examples, but just what's in my community, what's in my environment. And then we asked people for any other comments.

So the top sort of lines – 35 people completed the survey. People told us that they were from 12 different local areas in Scotland, so it covered quite a lot of Scotland in terms of where the survey was carried out.

Most people spent about an hour and a half on the survey, and on average there were about 10 references per person. So, 35 people noted over 350 alcohol references. The one that scored highest was social media, the one that scored lowest was clothing just at 6%. Foods mentioning alcohol – 31%. Litter – 54%. So quite a lot! And TV adverts – 34%.

And then we asked people were there any noticeable health messages on what you observed and 80% of people said no. And then the other stuff that we picked up was more qualitative so we could come back to some of the themes that came out of that in a bit later on in the conversation.

Rebecca:

You know the alcohol references with social media being the highest? I think we can all agree that we

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do see a lot of sponsored promoted posts wherever you are. Sometimes a Facebook feed could be littered with adverts and things and I think it was...it wasn't last year but it was the year before, for International Women's Day there was an alcohol brand who thought that they would use that day to raise awareness of whatever drink they were promoting and that ended up getting quite a backlash actually, surprisingly. Cause I think it was pink-flavoured alcohol or something like that and there was a bit of reaction to it, but I don't even know if it's in a different times of the year when you see more stuff on social media.

I know for example in the Euros we were seeing a lot of alcohol marketing there in the billboards and what people were saying. The likes in saying clothing was the lowest...but I think you can all agree at the top of your head the t-shirts that say stuff like 'may contain wine' and things like that. So in terms of the 350 alcohol references being noted with 35 people – like that's a lot! That is a lot of references. Do you think if we were to do it again would there be even more? Or if people had even more time would there be even more? Does anybody want to discuss the alcohol references?

Gemma:

Like you said, I think it's very interesting how many there are particularly given the context like you said...it wasn't that people were explicitly to go out looking for them, it was just noticing what comes up quite naturally in their lives.

So yes, how prevalent that is...obviously whether some of it...the types of things people are seeing, it's interesting to consider whether our current situation in terms of being much more in the house than we once were is obviously impacting on the types of references people are conscious of seeing...but that might be a response to obviously the industry knows people are at home and they're changing the ways they're marketing in response to that.

Susie:

I also wonder whether or not because we talked about the fact that it came out in a time when a lot of people were locked down and the survey was sort of conducted in the early part of 2021. I do think that we should have an expectation that if we run the survey again...that because people just are potentially out more often...and things have kinda shifted haven't they? Sort of culturally...in terms of it feels like everything is sort beginning to relax...I know there's sort of a low-level anxiety about the third wave and things like that coming and you don't really know what's going to happen in the autumn or in the winter. But I think if we were going to run the survey in September and even into early October we might see something different again in terms of the number of references being picked up.

Gemma:

I think you're right Susie, I think particularly if the survey was conducted at a time when people weren't going out into license premises for example and again if with the relaxation of the rules that might put a different slant on the types of references that people are seeing.

Rebecca:

I was just sort of looking at the comments that were made and a lot of people...as you said Susie with lockdown, it's definitely captured the picture of how everybody was feeling. But I also feel it was important to collect that information because people were saying seeing memes across social media where there was kinda of a 'you just need a drink, there's home-schooling we just need a drink' and people were trying to cover up I guess such a low mood with humour in a way.

But at the same time it was sort of coming into people's minds and they were noticing it a lot more and a lot of people were saying that's wrong and underestimating the sort of humour behind it. I know myself we've all seen the things on social media and fine, fair enough, but it's maybe like worth

knowing that are people going to say that's still there to this day? As you said, this pandemic is continuing on and on for who knows how long and would it be the same sort of picture?

But one comment as well said that they felt they underestimated the prevalence of alcohol because they were in their local area and they felt if they went into their city centre for example, that they would see more advertising. How do you think about that? Do you think that's a truth? Is anybody here taken the survey and seen that as a personal output? What do you think?

Louise:

I would definitely say that, you know when you're sitting at home all the time it's really social media that we're looking at or television. But now you're driving to your work every morning, people are getting buses, etc. you're out for your kids clubs, your out in the supermarket because you've not to go on one visit once a week...we have a lot more freedom now, it's absolutely everywhere. I think if you had the same amount of people doing it again you'll definitely get a much bigger volume.

So yeah, I would definitely say out more, seeing it everywhere.

Beverly:

I wondered as well if the alcohol companies themselves, baring in mind they know that lockdown is going to impact their sales, do they then look at their marketing budget and say right, nobody is going to be in the centre of Edinburgh for example where I am. So let's pull our adverts on Lothian buses and big billboards up wherever and focus more on social media because we know everybody is sitting at home on their Zoom calls. So it'll be interesting to see when we move out of lockdown if alcohol companies then refocus their advertising budget onto places that we're now a bit more comfortable going and the types of drinking we're more comforting doing. So, drinking in a pub as opposed to drinking at home. You know, that kinda thing.

Gemma:

Yeah, I think in general there's been you know over the last few years a shift towards the industry concentrating their spend more towards social media in general. Because that's a place where people more commonly are, so I think you're right that I would expect over this last 12-18 months their spend has increasingly gone that way. I would expect there would be the extent with the world opening back up there would be a bit of a reversal in that but I think one of the interesting things about the social media aspect of it is that it's not necessarily just about sponsored posts.

Actually I'm quite interested in what were people seeing in that social media because as you said there's different issues there...there'll be the sponsored posts but there's so much more in what we'd class as user-centered content which suits the industry because it's free and people are doing their jobs for them, they're sharing stuff that they're seeing...there's the memes, just general interaction with the posts just helps to spread these messages and spread the norm that we do need to drink to cope with the challenges of lockdown has brought to us all.

Rebecca:

Yeah, I think obviously there's like a whole research into the likes of social media. But I think it's like the whole algorithm thing that happens and if somebody mentions something then that means their account of whatever gets that metadata that gets taken and that's why the likes of the sponsored posts means that they can spread out or even things like that.

And we know that for example Facebook is now trying to focus more on people and letting them connect with what they want to connect which means for example charities are struggling a lot more with getting organic reach but the fact that these industries, these alcohol industries, can put a lot of money into that budget to make sponsored posts it's like no wonder people are seeing it. And if you think of teenagers for example ... how much are they going to be seeing on their phone? I think it was

Routes, Susie. I think it was the young person's group for Scottish Families Routes, where they said that even in their feeds that they were seeing a lot of alcohol marketing that was getting put through to them and things like that.

And I know of course we could go into a whole story about should these social media organisations be doing more for this. There does come a point where you're thinking what can be done if the likes of charities can't afford to put a big budget into a sponsored post, there's no way they can beat the likes of a sponsored post from elsewhere where a lot of money can be put in. But if we're thinking of that part of this Alcohol Action Group there is an educational feel to it, how do we educate people...is it public health campaigns the way forward? I know previously just an hour or so ago we were talking about alcohol labelling and how do we make that more noticeable. Because I think if people knew how many units were in the drinks they were consuming and how many units are considered to be healthy and what are the health risks...I think a lot of people would be quite shocked to hear that and not realise how much is in the drinks they're taking.

In terms of the alcohol survey and what's coming out of it, is there anything you did expect or do you think there was anything unexpected from it? Obviously the glaringly obvious in the covid response, but is there something else that was maybe quite unexpected to see?

Susie:

I would say that this is not unexpected because we have been in a culture where licensing and all of that stuff has come in like over a decade ago I'm sure...and so marketing and supermarkets and shops and everything have all sort of been had to get in line with licensing and requirements and everything like that. But it was very prominent in this survey, again in terms of context it was possibly one of the only places people were seeing alcohol because of the restrictions on movement and where you could be and not be so. But actually what it did do then was really pinpoint how invasive it can be in terms of it being present in supermarkets and shops because again our conversation earlier this morning when we were meeting together as a group, we talked about that whole idea of what would it look like if alcohol was no longer available as a sort of another thing alongside everything else in the supermarket.

I mean supermarkets are kinda like insane anyway, cause you can buy anything like clothing and toys. It's just...DIY stuff, stuff for your garden, it just like...blow your mind, you could lose yourself there for a whole day. But this idea that you could remove alcohol out of that environment completely and you would have to actually make a choice to go to somewhere that sells alcohol I think there's something about creating a completely separate space so it's actually an intentional part of your day, whereas for a lot of people...you know you have to make the effort to go there to buy it. Whereas a lot of people will buy it because they pass it. Like, you might not of bought a bottle of wine for dinner because you didn't pass it, so you just bought lemonade instead. So it is really interesting isn't it when you think about it.

Olivia:

That's a really good point Susie, it's Olivia here. I grew up in Ontario, Canada. When we had to go buy wine you would go to what they would call the LCBO – government entity, I can't remember what it stands for now. But if you wanted to buy beer you would go to...it's called the Beer Store.

Although...so I've lived in Scotland for 16 years, 2 years ago when I was back in Toronto and Ontario, that has changed slightly. Beer is starting to be sold in supermarkets but growing up in Ontario all my life, I remember if you wanted to get alcohol, wine, spirits, you go to the LCBO. Now that's probably different for the other provinces in Canada so I can't speak for the other provinces in Canada but yeah, that's the set-up they had in Ontario, Canada.

And then when I moved here 16 years ago and like you said, you can buy everything under the sun in the supermarket, I was blown away!

Susie:

Olivia, can I ask you a follow on question to that? Do you feel then like as being a place where you grew up, did you feel you had in a sense of your community, if felt much like alcohol was much less of a sort of...much less prevalent? Because you had to go somewhere specific to buy it or?

Olivia:

I think so. I mean, also the culture the drinking culture between Canadians and British or Scottish in particular, is very different as well. But I think that does make a difference. Because everything you said...like if you're just going for a normal shop and pass by and happen to see a bottle of alcohol that's on sale, you're more inclined to buy it. Whereas if you removed all of those types of products from the supermarket and you had to drive somewhere separate...somewhere else...I think that will make a difference, so.

Gemma:

I think it's the extent to which these things that help to create the culture. Like you said, if it is due to just...as a day to day item, the same way as any other product that you'd get in a supermarket then that does help to reinforce that it's just something that everybody does. It's the convenience of you're walking down the aisle and you just grab it into your basket. I think it's just the opportunism from it...if you look at the contrast with tobacco for example – where if you want to buy cigarettes now you've got to go to the kiosk at the entrance of the supermarket or behind the till – it's not necessarily about removing it entirely from the place but what are some of the options that could be a separate checkout if you wanted to buy alcohol or perhaps not being able to put it through the self-scanner.

Louise:

When we were at the height of lockdown and we were queued up around the supermarkets, the queue actually went up the alcohol aisle so we were standing up the alcohol aisle going down so slowly. It's not somewhere I go ever...in like very occasionally...in its like for a couple of beers if they're on offer, but the colours and I had one of my kids with me and she was like what's that and what's that and what's that and you're having to do an explanation down the aisle of everything that's available. So yeah, that was a bit awkward when you've got children!

But also they're seeing it on kid's Snapchat stories anyway. Any kid that's out drinking is putting everything on the social media of what they're doing so they're obviously seeing Snapchat stories and saying you know, she was on this that weekend or that or she drinks this all the time or she drinks that and asking you what it is because it's in their face all the time and obviously they want to know what's going on.

Gemma:

That's what I was saying earlier about the user generated content where it's actually...people are doing industries jobs for them now. They see this sort of stuff online and they begin to go what's that, they become familiar with brands.

For example – you know, back in 2019 we did some work with Children's Parliament which was looking at children's views and an alcohol free childhood and what that would mean to them and one of the things we asked as part of that was them to draw where they saw alcohol in their lives. And this was children who were 9 – 11 and I was really struck by their brand awareness as part of that. Where what they were drawing – for a lot of children it was just generic alcohol but a lot of them were really focusing on the specific brands they were aware of and if they're aware of that from 9 – 11 when they do reach legal drinking age, they've developed those associations, perhaps those infinities with brands that they're going to focus on if they decide to start drinking.

Louise:

You know when you go down the park on a Sunday morning to take the kids down the park and there's just so many cans of like Dragon Soup. Seen it on Saturday and all over social media and then they're finding the cans in the park on the Sunday morning. And they are little kids and if they're living in houses where there's multiple ages with teenagers that are maybe starting to experience it and younger kids and obviously it has an effect on them because they can see what's happening and they see older siblings coming in or asking for it or drinking it or hiding it and that sorta thing. So it's definitely going to be having an effect on the younger children.

Gemma:

And again I think that's thinking about marketing of alcohol in its broadest sense and about that it's the things like packaging is a key part of that. The design of these products appeal to particular demographics so they look appealing to you know, they might be particularly appealing to younger people who are just commencing their drinking journey and things and they look nice. And that's why they want to drink them.

Louise:

Yeah and want to be involved in it as well because...I've been in social groups with children and 15-16 year olds, couple of the parents allow a couple of cans of Dragon Soup and some parents don't so they're going with a wee bottle of wine and things like that and the pressure is to be drinking the same as everybody else. It looks colourful and it looks cool and how it affects you is completely different to how if you were having a little glass of wine and it's just like...they're continually chasing the high of what they're....the image of it as well as how it affects their body kind of thing.

Rebecca:

Even in the survey, like the second highest that people seen alcohol was litter. Which I personally never would have thought about. I would never of said oh litter. But the fact is you're right Louise, there's cans littered about everywhere and even a name like Dragon Soup and I'm a bit older now so that was never the thing I had seen in school but when you hear something like that it's like of course somebody is wanting to find out what that is. Of course someone wants to find out more about it, or be part of it or try what it is. There's just this really appealing sense to it.

Scottish Families are members of Alcohol Health Alliance UK and recently I was speaking to their Communications Manager who said they were trying to stop the glamourisation of stock images of alcohol and they were trying to encourage the media for example to not use them and to not make them look tempting and things like that and I think they're right...if we look in terms of drugs for example, substances. A lot of that imagery is dark and moody and quite yeah...quite a gloomy dark atmosphere to it but then when you look at the alcohol side of things it's brighter, it's in a sort of social setting, within like friends home or it's in a pub, places like that. And it's quite weird because alcohol obviously is a drug itself but there's such a weird split to see it. If we were looking at litter in the street if it was a discarded needle or things like that would there be more of an uproar to that rather than just walking by the can of Dragon Soup on the grass in the park? There's such a big difference when it comes to look at things like that.

The survey has really highlighted the fact that 35 people could see 350 alcohol references in the time that it took and I know of the age range, there was more...it was more 25 and up so there really wasn't that much from people under 25. I think even as well, in terms of the Alcohol Action Group it would be good to hear from younger people and to hear what it is that they see and hear what it is that they think of things because I personally feel alcohol marketing is kinda being directed to them more than it is directed to others. I mean that might not be statistically true, but there's definitely something around the younger generation being able to see more alcohol marketing, more things about going out at the weekend and nightclubs and things like that. I know we're not supposed to talk about

nightclubs in terms of covid right now because that's an uproar as well, but there's something very strange about it.

I think it was good to have this survey at the time it was because it gave more people the time to think about it instead of being back out and socialising again. There was something about being able to sit down and actually think it through. So obviously the lockdown and covid did affect the survey in itself. But when we think about us in the services and the organisations we come from – was there a rise in people drinking alcohol to cope with the lockdown?

I know in Scottish Families Susie, we were seeing quite a high amount of people coming to the Helpline – specifically a person affected by their own problem and alcohol was probably the top – it might have been the top or the second top – but it was the one that was coming in the most in what people were seeing. And people were at home more and they were noticing that alcohol was an issue at home more. I know Beverly, you and me spoke earlier this year and you said you noticed more alcohol prevalence where you live and things like that. So from Alcohol Focus Scotland and stuff like that, was there a rise in people drinking do you think?

Simon:

From our perspective yeah. We've seen some indications of this from early on in the pandemic was that some people were drinking less but they tended to be drinking less to begin with. And people who had been drinking at more harmful levels they did tend to be drinking more and often by quite a large amount. There was suggestion that there were some really shocking statistics about England and Wales about the increase in alcohol death and with that people are thinking that people may have been drinking at a high level for quite a long time. And then during the period of lockdown it's increased an awful lot.

One of the problems obviously is when we talk about people drinking to cope, the point is almost that's not at all the solution to whatever problem they're trying to deal with it. And we need to try and get people to support for whatever might be going on in their lives that is kinda causing them to drink.

Rebecca:

Louise do you want to jump in with anything – did your organisation see an increase in support?

Louise:

Yeah, absolutely. We were so busy and other services in this area because they were constantly asking us to support and take on the overflow and we were at maximum as well so that was a bit of an issue with us, but yeah.

I think just talking to people in general. Not having to get up and drive to your work the next morning and not being in an office environment, all those things, people that you were talking to who you knew were drinking once in a blue moon prior to lockdown were feeling the need to every night, you know home-schooling, the memes on Facebook and things like that, making it acceptable that you needed it doing home-school and trying to work from home.

I think during that lockdown period it just became quite normalised to just be sitting having a glass of wine at night, rather than your usual cup of tea or you're not running out to kids activities, you're not doing the things you were doing prior to that, like gyms are closed and stuff. I think there was obviously...even people who don't have problematic alcohol use at all were still finding a massive increase in their alcohol intake just in general chat. You were finding more people were doing their stock up on a weekly basis at their supermarket to make sure they had enough wine for the whole week because they'd only be there one time that week and you were like...! When did that become a priority? But it just kinda seemed how it was going.

Gemma:

And I think it's the fact that obviously drinking at home is a much less controlled environment as well. So if you're drinking in a license premise for example, where it's very defined measures that you'd be getting. You know at home, you're not generally doing that. So it's quite easy for the measures you're drinking to be larger than you'd usually get and therefore the number of units that people are drinking kinda creep up without people really noticing.

Rebecca:

Does anybody have anything else they want to talk about? Maybe in terms of the survey or anything else that's maybe that's quite current? Because obviously it's been a wee while now since the survey and we've had things like the Euros where there were alcohol marketing on display and a few footballers had moved alcohol out the way which is quite a promising thing to see when you look at things like nightclubs like that and vaccine passports to get in there and Beverly you sent us a blog recently about the Danish film Another Round and I thought you said something absolutely brilliant about how there was lockdown, I think it was you said around everybody was just really looking forward to the restrictions being lifted so they could get back to the pub and things like that. So does anybody has anything they want to chip in or anything they want to mention that would be good for this part of the podcast?

Louise:

I think, yeah. Obviously with the Euros and the amount of sponsorship that we saw there and the likes of Ronaldo moving the alcohol out the way and the Coca Cola out the way and focusing on water. But then there were a few other players and managers who then made a kinda joke of it and went in and opened Heineken and started drinking it on the camera as if they were mocking Ronaldo for moving it out the way. So I think that was quite, you know, when somebody is trying to make a positive choice and other people in that area are mocking the positive choices made by people and playing it down as a joke – that didn't really help the situation so that was a bit disappointing to watch.

Gemma:

I think it's that relationship between sport and alcohol is an interesting one. These people are at the peak of their physical fitness and things and actually trying to encourage people into sport is about improving their health and actually the relationships between sports and unhealthy commodities, are those the right brands that should be partnering with sport?

And it's really interesting that you know, Scottish Women's Football have made a stand not to accept sponsorship from gambling or food or alcohol – some individual clubs have also actually off the back of the Euros came out and made similar stands. I think it'll be interesting to see whether the stance of some of these footballers begins to change...if not lead to any immediate change, but at least it's...I think it's so interesting that it's actually started or highlighted the conversation and the need for us to be having that conversation about – are these relationships appropriate?

Rebecca:

Brilliant, okay, thank you so much. Susie do you want to do a bit about the Alcohol Action Group itself and the next survey and how people can get involved in it?

Susie:

So if you want to get involved in the Alcohol Action Group you can get in contact with us at Scottish Families. You can also follow us on Twitter – it's @alcsfad. If you want to take part in the survey, watch out that'll be coming out soon. I think we'll probably plan to put the survey out in September and run it during the month of September. And yeah, we'd really welcome people who are interested in getting involved. The other thing we're talking about at the moment is just being more active in

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terms of how we get involved in consultations, writing to MPs and MSPs so again watch out for that, we'd love you to get involved and be part of that.

Rebecca:

Great okay, thank you and thank you to everyone for taking part. Really appreciate it!

Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.