



## Have yourself a ‘merry’ little Christmas: Alcohol adverts and alcohol content within adverts in the run-up to Christmas

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### ABSTRACT

Exposure to alcohol adverts or other audio-visual content (AVC) in the media is associated with alcohol initiation and subsequent use by adolescents and adults, especially those with or at risk of an alcohol use disorder. The Christmas period is characterised by increased alcohol consumption and there may be an increase in alcohol advertisements during this period. The current study explored the number of alcohol advertisements shown on UK television in a sample of days in the run-up to Christmas 2022 and found that alcohol advertisements were commonly shown but alcohol was also seen in advertisements for other things such as supermarkets. The amount of alcohol shown is likely to encourage drinking and make Christmas a difficult time for people with alcohol use disorders or who are in recovery.

In 2019/2020, there were 8974 UK deaths from alcohol-specific causes [1], with a further 280 thousand hospital admissions due to alcohol [2]. Harmful alcohol use is thus a clear public health priority.

Exposure to alcohol adverts or other audio-visual content (AVC) in the media is associated with alcohol initiation and subsequent use by adolescents [3]. However, alcohol adverts affect everyone of all ages, especially people with, or at risk of, an alcohol use disorder, who are more likely to notice alcohol adverts and find this appealing, which translates to increased sales [4]. Similarly, people in recovery state that alcohol adverts is a risk to their recovery [4]. This has led to calls to restrict alcohol marketing to protect the population from this marketing in an attempt to protect their human right to a healthy lifestyle [4].

The Christmas period is characterised by an increase in alcohol consumption [5]. Previous studies have explored the alcohol content of TV programmes, with one study exploring adverts which found that there may be an increase in alcohol adverts in the run-up to the Christmas break [6], however, there is a lack of data on the number of alcohol adverts shown in the run-up to Christmas. Further, adverts can contain alcohol content without specifically being for an alcohol brand; for example, alcohol content regularly appears in supermarket Christmas adverts. This study aimed to quantify the number of alcohol adverts shown, and the amount of, number of, and amount of alcohol content featured in supermarket adverts.

Over a 5-day period (December 1st – December 5th), all UK broadcast TV footage of the three main commercial channels between the peak family viewing hours of 6 pm - 10 p.m., were viewed via Box of Broadcasts [7]. The number of advertisements (including alcohol and supermarket advertisements) was recorded. A 10-s content analysis, a 10-s version of a method used to explore content in TV programmes [8] was conducted on supermarket advertisements.

Over the 5-day period, a total of 2063 adverts were shown across the three main free-to-view channels containing adverts in the UK between 6 pm and 10 pm. Of these, 86 were for alcohol products, with the most prominent being Guinness with 14 adverts shown (See Fig. 1).

Seven supermarket Christmas advertisements were identified, with adverts six of seven containing alcohol content. Of 54 10-s intervals across all the adverts, 15 contained alcohol content (28% of intervals). Adverts from the six supermarkets which contained alcohol were seen 73 times over the period of the study, with one of these being seen 31 times. In one advert, alcohol content is shown 13 times, including four examples of implied use, showing glasses of alcohol on tables, bottles being shown on screen eight times and wine also being mentioned by the voiceover.

This short report highlights the amount of alcohol being shown through adverts during a 5-day period in December 2022 during the peak family viewing hours of 6 pm - 10 pm. Whilst direct alcohol adverts

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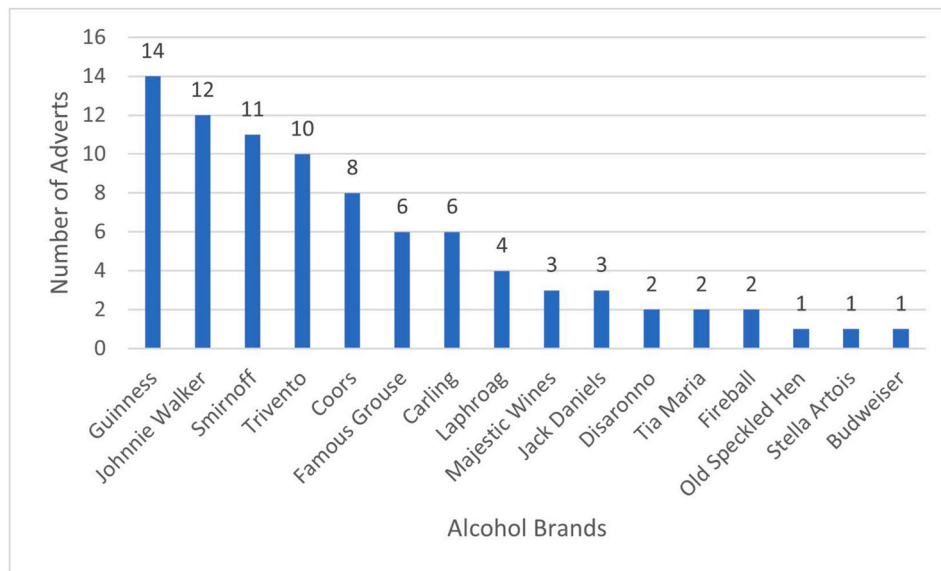


Fig. 1. Number of adverts for alcohol brands.

were relatively rare, it is likely that the large amount of alcohol content shown in supermarket adverts during this period was widely seen by the UK population.

Alcohol adverts were seen 86 times during peak viewing hours during the 5-day period in early December, these are likely to be shown regularly in the lead-up to Christmas and subsequently influence sales during this period. The release of supermarket Christmas adverts is now an annual event, these adverts are often released a month prior to Christmas and repeatedly shown until Christmas Day. It is thus likely that these would receive widespread exposure in this time.

The supermarket adverts usually contained scenes of an idealised Christmas, with food on the table regularly accompanied by wine bottles and glasses. Consumers are likely to see this as desirable and feel the need to include alcohol in their own Christmas. In line with Social Learning Theory [9], individuals imitate the behaviour of influential others, in this case, those they see in the adverts, to achieve the Christmas they desire.

Alcohol adverts lead to increased sales [4], likely leading to increased alcohol consumption during the holiday period. The exposure to this content is hardest felt by those with or at risk of, an alcohol use disorder. The widespread use of alcohol adverts and adverts which contains alcohol content likely made the run-up to Christmas difficult for many people in the UK, particularly those with, or at risk of an alcohol use disorder, or those in recovery, impacting their human right to a healthy lifestyle.

#### Author statements

Ethical approval for this study was not sought as this study explores

publicly available data.

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The authors declare no competing interests.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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