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The absolute truth: Alcohol companies sponsored disproportionately more queer Pride festivals than July Fourth festivals in 2019

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Despite known disparities in alcohol use among queer communities in the United States, little is known about the extent to which alcohol companies sponsor queer Pride festivals each June. This study aimed to (1) examine the nature and extent of alcohol sponsorship of Pride in 2019 and (2) compare the prevalence of alcohol sponsorship for Pride versus Fourth of July festivals.

Methods: We identified Pride festivals through InterPride's 2019 Pride Radar Report and Fourth of July festivals by searching Google. Researchers recorded each festival's name and location, then sorted their sponsors into ten categories. We adjusted for overall population count and same-sex couple count estimates; and only included cities in our sample that hosted both Pride and Fourth of July festivals in 2019.

Results: Researchers identified 207 Pride and 154 Fourth of July festivals in 45 states and 129 cities, which included 4,643 Pride and 972 Fourth of July festival sponsors. Pride festivals had a significantly higher percentage of alcohol sponsors (9.1% (95% Cl: 9.0%, 9.1%)) compared to Fourth of July festivals (2.0% (95% Cl: 1.9%, 2.2%)) (p < 0.001). We also found a significant interaction between the prevalence of alcohol sponsors and US region.

Conclusions: Our findings indicate a greater need to understand the extent to which alcohol marketing at Pride celebrations contributes to alcohol use.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Additional data can inform the sponsorship policies of Pride festivals and enable festival organizers to make informed choices about alcohol sponsors and their marketing limits.

KEYWORDS

Alcohol sponsorship; alcohol use; health disparities; LGBQIA; Pride; TGNC

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Introduction

Despite increasing visibility and piecemeal political gains in the United States (US), both LGBQIA+¹ and transgender/gender non-conforming/genderqueer (TGNC) communities experience disproportionate rates of alcohol use disorder and heavy drinking when compared to straight and cisgender people (Azagba et al., 2019; Fish & Baams, 2018; Glossary of Terms, 2023; Hequembourg et al., 2020; Isn't "Queer" a Bad Word? n.d; Peralta et al., 2019; Rocheleau, 2019; Vu et al., 2019). These drinking disparities especially affect bisexual or questioning youth, cisgender women who identify as bisexual, as well as queer and/or TGNC-identifying people of color (Corliss et al., 2008; Fish, 2019; Greene et al., 2020; Green & Feinstein, n.d.). A greater understanding of what drives alcohol use among queer and TGNC communities is needed not only to address these persistent disparities in alcohol use, but also because its abuse has substantial costs to public health and the economy (Axley et al., 2019; Sacks et al., 2015).

In their explanations for alcohol disparities among queer communities, researchers have relied almost exclusively on stress and coping modelsmodels which aim to untangle the interplay of stigma and marginalization and discrimination. The Minority Stress Model posits that queer people experience increased mental health problems because of stress related to discrimination, expectations of rejection, concealment, and internalized homophobia (Meyer, 2015). The exacerbated mental health problems then, in turn, increase the risk of people drinking as a coping mechanism (Slater et al., 2017). Hatzenbuehler (2009) expanded upon the Minority Stress Model by incorporating a psychological mediation framework. He suggests that "sexual and gender minorities" experience increased stress from facing stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). In the Minority Stress Model, stigma-related stress is caused by social status and leads to mental health problems; however, in the Psychological Mediation Framework, stress contributes to psychological mediators and mental health problems (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). This framework isolates stress and suggests that sexual minorities are more vulnerable to general psychological processes than heterosexuals. It considers the unique stressors faced by the queer community and the common psychological vulnerabilities shared with heterosexuals (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). A strong body of evidence supports these psychological frameworks, demonstrating a positive relationship between stress, poor mental health, and increased rates of alcohol use among queer communities (Bryan et al., 2017; Mulia et al., 2008; Pachankis et al., 2014). Ultimately, this framework aims to understand and reduce mental health disparities in the queer community (Hatzenbuehler, 2009).

Commercial determinants of health are strategies used by companies to promote products that can shape health through marketing or other company practices—and therefore can unintentionally contribute to negative health outcomes (e.g. via alcohol, tobacco, and ultra-processed food) (Lee et al., 2022). A person's environment and the commercial activities that shape our physical and social environments can affect one's preference for alcohol (WHO, 2023). Therefore, these drinking disparities should be considered in the context of corporate determinants of health since actions by companies, such as industry marketing to promote alcohol products, can impact health (McDowell et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020; Stevens et al., 2004). The alcohol industry uses a variety of marketing strategies. These include targeted advertising, corporate sponsorship, and lobbying efforts to undermine policies that aim to reduce alcohol consumption (Jernigan & Ross, 2020). Corporate sponsorship has been one of the fastest-growing forms of marketing for alcohol and other companies. Sponsorships allow companies to reach "targeted niche markets without the expense and uncertainty associated with traditional advertising" ("The Importance," 2021). They help businesses shape consumer attitudes, build brand awareness, drive sales, and encourage word-of-mouth marketing which ultimately increases a company's reach ("The Importance," 2021).

Alcohol companies have maintained a long history of engaging with marginalized communities in the US (Leading with Pride - Absolut Vodka, n.d.). One space serving as a primary marketing vehicle for alcohol companies to reach queer consumers is the Pride parade and festival. Pride festivals are annual events commemorating the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York and the queer liberation movement ignited afterward (Baume, 2020). Each June in the US, queer communities celebrate, organize, and demonstrate for legal rights and social justice (Baume, 2020). At its beginning, in 1970, Pride was a protest comprised of a small group of activists and organizers (Baume, 2020). But starting around the 1990s, Pride became commodified by corporations from wide-ranging industries that recognized the purchasing and spending power of the newly emerging "pink market" (Abad-Santos, 2018). Around this time gay men, in particular, were targeted by alcohol industries to maximize profits (Adams et al., 2007). Alcohol companies were the first corporations to tap into this new market, and have sponsored Pride events longer than any other kind of corporation (Abad-Santos, 2018).

Alcohol sponsorship of Pride events is concerning given the research showing how direct sponsorship may influence drinking behaviors (O'Brien & Kypri, 2008; Zerhouni et al., 2019). One study showed that professional athletes who received a direct alcohol sponsorship at the individual, team, and club level scored 2.4 points higher on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)—a test developed by the World Health Organization to assess alcohol consumption drinking behaviors—compared 4 🔄 J. ARSHONSKY ET AL.

to those who received no sponsorship (O'Brien & Kypri, 2008). Another experimental study examined adolescents' implicit recall of alcohol, junk food, and gambling brand sponsorship in Australian sports. Eighty-five participants aged 5–12 years were asked to arrange two sets of magnets—one board with seven sports team logos and the other with 16 brand logos. The researchers did not prompt participants about the nature of sports sponsorships. Seventy-seven percent of participants identified at least one correct shirt sponsor, and children associated alcohol and gambling brands more highly with the National Rugby League than the Australian Football League (Bestman et al., 2015). This study suggests that youth exposed to alcohol sponsorships from sports events can implicitly recall alcohol and other unhealthy commodity brands, and this exposure can encourage future alcohol use (Grenard et al., 2013).

Despite the pervasiveness of alcohol sponsorship of Pride events, only one study in the public health literature has examined the extent to which alcohol companies sponsor US Pride festivities (Spivey et al., 2018). In 2017, researchers assessed Pride events for tobacco policies and alcohol sponsorships by examining the websites of each Pride event for written policies on tobacco and presence of alcohol sponsors. In their sample of 100 US cities, the researchers identified 103 Pride events and found that 71% of Pride websites listed their sponsors; and of those, there were 43 Pride events (61%) sponsored by alcohol companies. The two most common alcohol sponsors were E. & J. Gallo Winery (under their Barefoot Wine & Bubbly Brand) and AB InBev (under their Bud Light brand). While Pride festival organizers may seek alcohol sponsorships to fund aspects of the parade and other related events, it is also possible that alcohol companies may target queer communities because of long-standing relationships with Pride events and celebrations. To date, no studies have compared Pride sponsorships to other festival sponsorships.

This study builds upon previous research by quantifying the prevalence of alcohol sponsors at Pride in 2019. It is the first study to compare alcohol sponsorships at Pride versus Fourth of July festivals and compare alcohol sponsorships by region of the US, while controlling for potential confounding variables. Understanding the extent to which alcohol companies sponsor Pride each year is important because such targeted marketing may perpetuate health inequities among queer communities.

Methods

Identifying Pride and Fourth of July festivals

This descriptive study used observational methods to compare sponsorships between Pride and a similarly-sized and similarly timed festival—same

season and within at most a month of one another. Fourth of July or Independence Day parades met these conditions, so it became our comparison festival. Festivals with sizable audiences have the potential to attract alcohol sponsors and, it is possible that similarly-sized and timed festivals are likely to share the same sponsors. Descriptive data were pulled from publicly available online sources.

To identify US Pride festivals in 2019, we searched online for the Pride Radar Report, which lists Pride events occurring worldwide (Fish, 2019). PrideRadar is a comprehensive, ongoing research project of InterPride that collects data on the global pride movement. These reports contain a list of pride events and the political climate they took place in (e.g. hostile/critical, unstable/ambiguous, or safe/supporting/accepting) ("Pride Radar, n.d.). We recorded the name of all US Pride festivals, the city and state in which the festival took place, and the festival's website link. To identify our comparison group, we searched www.Google.com for Fourth of July festivals from the 129 cities in our dataset that hosted one or more Pride festivals. Our search identified 58 cities hosting both types of festivals. For the 78 Pride festivals in cities without Fourth of July festivals, we identified a nearby Fourth of July festival in a city with a similar population size in the same state. We excluded private events and events without an online website or Facebook page (n = 114).

We did not require protocol approval from our institutional review board, because the study did not involve human participants.

Identifying sponsorships

To identify sponsorships, we followed the methods of Spivey et al. (2018). Researchers examined the websites of festivals and screen-captured sponsorship lists. Similar to other sponsorship studies (Greene et al., 2020), we identified companies as sponsors if they were listed as an official sponsor, if their logo/name appeared on the website, or if the company provided discounts or prizes to attendees.

Data coding

Five research assistants blind to the study's purpose sorted sponsors into 10 categories: government (e.g. municipalities, non-profits); healthcare; alcohol (e.g. brands, bars); food or nonalcoholic drinks; media (e.g. radio); automotive or transportation (e.g. Uber); retail (e.g. restaurants); education; sports; service provider or telecommunications (e.g. law firm, Comcast); and other (e.g. religious organization, individuals). The research assistants then collectively coded 10% of the sponsors to establish 90%

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inter-rater reliability. Once interrater reliability was established, the remaining 90% of sponsorships were divided among the five coders to be sorted into categories. Interrater reliability was defined as coders having 90% agreement or higher when they sorted the sponsorship into a given category. Coding disagreements were resolved by having the lead author discuss and clarify the decision with coders until an agreement was reached.

Covariates

We collected city-level population size estimates from the US Census Bureau, and gathered county-level same-sex couple estimates for each city from the University of California–Los Angeles School of Law Williams Institute in 2019.

We were interested in whether urbanicity and region modified the prevalence of alcohol sponsorship, because both dimensions moderate advertising exposure (Axley et al., 2019; Sacks et al., 2015). To categorize urbanicity, we used the 2010 US Census Urban and Rural Classification and Urban Area Criteria: large cities of 50,000+ people and smaller cities of at least 2,500+, and <50,000 people. Rural areas encompass populations not included within an urban area. In our final sample of cities, none were classified as rural. We categorized regions as Northeast, South, West, or Midwest based on the Census Bureau Regions and Divisions.

Data analysis

We reported the count (%) of festivals in each state and quantified the total and average number and type of sponsors for each festival. The absolute number of sponsors of the two types of festivals is quite different, which informed our decision to parameterize the outcome as a percentage. We used a linear regression model with fixed effects for state to estimate the association between the type of festival and percentage of sponsorships associated with alcohol companies. Because alcohol companies may have used the population size of cities to determine which festivals to sponsor, we adjusted for population count and same-sex couple count estimates; and only included cities for which we had a matched pair (i.e. cities that hosted both festivals). In a sensitivity analysis, we estimated the same model with the full sample, regardless of whether a city had a matched pair.

We ran one model that included all Pride and Fourth of July festivals, and a separate model for all cities that had a matched pair (e.g. New York City had a Pride festival and Fourth of July festival). We included the following predictors in each model: region of the US (i.e. Northeast; South; Midwest; West); overall population size of the city/town; same-sex couple estimates in the city/town; urbanicity (i.e. urbanized: 50,000+ residents; urban clusters: 2,500-49,999 residents; rural: <2,500 residents) according to the US Census ("Census Urban and Rural," 2010). We also tested for differences by urbanicity by including an interaction term (urban vs. non-urban) in the regression model, and we used post-estimation marginal commands to estimate the average percentage of alcohol sponsors per category. We separately tested for differences by region by stratifying regression models by region. We used Stata version 15 for analyses (CIT) ("Announcing Stata Release 15" n.d.).

Results

We identified 207 Pride festivals and 154 Fourth of July festivals in the U.S. in 2019. In total 129 cities had Pride festivals, and 58 of those cities also had Fourth of July festivals. We excluded cities that did not have sponsorship data for Fourth of July Festivals. Fourth of July Festivals are more traditional and therefore, require less advertisements than pride festivals. The largest category of sponsorships among both Pride festivals (23.6%; n = 1,094), and Fourth of July festivals (28.9%; n = 281) were service providers (Table 1). Alcohol was the sixth largest category of sponsors for Pride festivals and the eighth largest category for Fourth of July. By alcohol brand, Tito's Vodka had the most Pride sponsorships (n = 40), followed by Bud Light (n = 34), and Smirnoff (n = 20).

Controlling for population size and same-sex couple estimates, Pride festivals had a significantly higher percentage of alcohol sponsors (9.1% (95% CI: 9.0%, 9.1%)) compared to Fourth of July festivals (2.0% (95% CI: 1.9%, 2.2%)) in the US in 2019 (p < 0.001).

Sponsorship Categories	Pride Festivals Total Number of Sponsors (n = 4,643), No. (%)	Fourth of July Festivals Total Number of Sponsors (n = 972), No. (%)
Government	538 (11.4)	191 (19.7)
Healthcare	466 (10.0)	30 (3.1)
Alcohol	351 (7.6)	21 (2.2)
Food or Nonalcoholic Drinks	100 (2.2)	24 (2.5)
Media	416 (9.0)	139 (14.3)
Automotive or Transportation	185 (4.0)	30 (3.1)
Retail	897 (19.3)	106 (10.9)
Education	89 (1.9)	17 (1.8)
Sports	59 (1.3)	12 (1.2)
Service Provider or Telecommunications	1094 (23.6)	281 (28.9)
Other	456 (9.8)	121 (12.5)

Table 1. Characteristics of Pride and Fourth of July Festivals in 2019.

Note. This table demonstrates that Pride festivals had a significantly higher percentage of alcohol sponsors (9.1% (95% CI: 9.0%, 9.1%)) compared to Fourth of July festivals (2.0% (95% CI: 1.9%, 2.2%)) in the US in 2019 (p < 0.001).

We observed a statistically significant interaction by urbanicity (p < 0.001)—the difference in the percentage of alcohol sponsors was approximately 1.0% (95% CI: -1.5%, -0.5%) larger in smaller cities versus more urban, larger cities (p < 0.001).

We also found regional differences in the percentage of alcohol sponsors at Pride compared to Fourth of July festivals. In the South, alcohol company sponsorship of Pride was significantly larger (by 11.1% [95% CI: 10.5%, 11.6%]) than Fourth of July. The second largest difference in sponsorship prevalence was in the Northeast, in which the prevalence of alcohol company sponsorships at Pride was also significantly larger (by 7.7% [95% CI: 7.5%, 7.9%]) than Fourth of July festivals in the region. Similarly, in the West, alcohol sponsorship of Pride was significantly larger (by 7.2% [95% CI: 7.1%, 7.3%]) larger than Fourth of July festivals. Finally, the Midwest had the smallest, and statistically insignificant, difference in prevalence; alcohol sponsorship of Pride was 1.9% (95% CI: 1.5%, 2.2%) larger than Fourth of July festivals.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the most comprehensive investigation of alcohol industry sponsorship of Pride festivals in the US, and the first investigation to compare the prevalence of alcohol sponsorship between Pride and Fourth of July festivals. Our study suggests that alcohol companies sponsored Pride extensively in 2019, which is concerning given the high rates of alcohol use disorders among queer people (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2017).

Our sample also indicated that alcohol companies disproportionately sponsored more Pride than Fourth of July festivals, even when controlling for location, urbanity, and population size estimates. Although it is unclear if the difference in sponsorship could be attributed to other factors (e.g. Pride festivals may skew toward younger attendees than Fourth of July festivals), alcohol companies should examine the extent to which they may contribute to alcohol misuse among queer youth. Sponsorships are particularly concerning given that youth aged 18–30 years comprise the majority of attendees at Pride parades and events (Cici, 2010; Peterson et al., 2018). Research has shown that young adults aware of alcohol sports sponsors may develop more positive drinking attitudes (Brown, 2016).

We also observed regional differences in the percentage of alcohol sponsors at Pride versus Fourth of July festivals, where sponsorship of Pride festivals was 11.1% higher than Fourth of July festivals in the South, for example. Policy data from the Movement Advancement Project indicates that southern states—such as Alabama and Mississippi—have fewer (if any) protections from hate crime laws, which may make queer people even more vulnerable to seeking alcohol as a coping tool while living in less supportive environments (*Movement Advancement Project*, n.d.).

Previous studies investigated disparities in alcohol use among queer communities through psychological frameworks-through the effects of shame, stigma, and marginalization (Bryan et al., 2017; Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2015; Mulia et al., 2008; Pachankis et al., 2014; Slater et al., 2017). As our study and previous work shows, environmental factors like alcohol company sponsorships are extensive, and based on sports sponsorship literature, they do have a significant influence on consumers' drinking behaviors (Guillou Landreat et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2011). At Pride festivals in particular, sponsorships are usually tiered. Each tier includes in-person marketing perks for the event. For the highest levels of sponsorship, frequently named "presenting sponsors," marketing packages can include naming rights (i.e. branded stages), speaking opportunities, advertising space in radio and print media, website branding, corporate tents, and corporate banners (2020 Sponsorship Opportunities-Capital Pride 2021, n.d.). As alcohol companies make their presence known through any of the various sponsorship tiers, festival attendees will undoubtedly face in-person marketing at Pride events that can potentially influence their alcohol use (Corliss et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2020).

Limitations

There are several limitations to our study. First, the cross-sectional design of this study prevents our ability to make causal inferences. Second, given the small sample size of this study, the results should be interpreted with caution. Third, we did not have access to data on alcohol consumption at festivals, which is an area for future research. Fourth, the demographics of attendees between festivals may differ and account for the difference in sponsorships. Fifth, 2019 was the 50th anniversary of Pride, making it the largest celebration to date. This milestone may have attracted more companies and accounted for a higher number of sponsors; however, Fourth of July festivals are a national holiday that target a larger audience than Pride festivals, suggesting the size of the festival may not account for the high rate of alcohol sponsors at Pride. Finally, the LGBTQIA + community faces unique challenges when acquiring sponsorships to support festivals and events. Some companies may be less willing to support queer pride festivals, which could put pressure on festival organizers to accept sponsors from companies that might not be their preferred choice.

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Conclusion

Our findings indicate a greater need to understand the extent to which alcohol sponsorship of Pride celebrations contributes to alcohol use. Because many festivals rely on funding from sponsors and generate large economic outputs for their residing counties, they may not be willing to forgo alcohol sponsorships. Organizers of festival venues, however, should consider revising their sponsorship agreements with alcohol companies. This could include restricting a company's in-person marketing efforts (e.g. branded stages) during Pride. The government should also ban free samples of alcohol at all such festivals, similar to current prohibitions on freegiveaways of tobacco products. Additional data can inform the sponsorship policies of Pride festivals and enable festival organizers to make informed choices about sponsors.

Note

1. For this article, we use "LGBTQIA+" and the umbrella term "queer" to refer to people with diverse sexual orientations (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or questioning, intersexual, asexual, etc.) and gender identities given both terms are widely used to honor individual differences in people's preferred term.

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Availability of data and material

Data available upon request from corresponding author.

Authors' contributions

All authors originated the study idea. Josh Arshonsky led the data collection, and he and Marie Bragg led the writing. Pasquale Rummo led the analysis. All authors edited and approved the final article.

Disclosure statement

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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