



Sugar and carbohydrate claims affect perceptions of alcohol healthiness

PROBLEM:

Alcohol companies are using a range of nutrition claims to attract consumers.¹ Claims referring to sugar and carbohydrate content are notable examples.² These claims have the potential to create a 'health halo' that can mislead the public into thinking alcohol is healthy.³ The creation of a 'health halo' is problematic for alcohol products given the potential to distract consumers from the health risks associated with even low levels of consumption.⁴

AIM:

To investigate whether the presence of sugar and carbohydrate claims on alcohol products influence perceptions of the healthiness of alcoholic beverages.

SAMPLE:

A national sample of 1,356 Australian adults aged 18+ years who consumed alcohol at least twice per month responded to an online survey between 3-21 October 2024. Respondents were recruited via an ISO-accredited panel provider (Pureprofile).

METHODS:

The study used a well-established methodology for assessing the effects of product labels.⁵ Each respondent was randomised to either a sugar claims group or a carbohydrate claims group. Those in the sugar claims group saw mock premix, cider, and wine products, and those in the carbohydrate claims group saw mock cider, beer, and spirits products.

Initially, each respondent saw a series of 3 product variants for each of the 3 product categories, none of which displayed claims (see Figure 1). After they had rated these products for perceived healthiness (5-point scale: 'Very unhealthy' to 'Very healthy'), they were exposed to the same product variants, this time with two products in each series displaying a claim. One of the two products displayed a specific claim (e.g., '<2g sugar') and the other a general claim (e.g., 'low sugar'). Respondents again ranked each product on a 5-point perceived healthiness scale.

Odds ratios were calculated to determine the extent to which exposure to claims influenced healthiness perceptions. Those selecting 'healthy' or 'very healthy' on the 5-point scale were deemed to consider the product to be healthy. Analyses were conducted to identify any differences in effect by age.

Figure 1: Experimental stimuli example





RESULTS:



Compared to when they viewed an alcohol product without a claim, respondents were

three times

more likely to consider the same product to be healthy when it displayed

a sugar claim



Compared to when they viewed an alcohol product without a claim, respondents were

twice as likely

to consider the same product to be healthy when it displayed

a carbohydrate claim

Younger drinkers (18–24 years) were **1.5 times more likely**

to view products with **sugar claims as healthy** compared to **older respondents**

CONCLUSION:

This study demonstrates that the presence of sugar and carbohydrate claims on alcohol products can mislead consumers by influencing perceptions of alcohol healthiness. The stronger effect observed among younger respondents for sugar claims is highly problematic due to these claims being most prevalent on premix and cider products,^{2,6} which are more frequently consumed by younger people.⁷ The increasing use of sugar and carbohydrate claims by the alcohol industry could jeopardise the reductions in alcohol use among young people that have been observed in recent years.⁸ These findings are relevant given current proposals by Australia and New Zealand's food regulatory agency (FSANZ) to newly and explicitly permit sugar claims on labelling and in associated marketing of alcoholic products.⁹ Removing claims with demonstrated potential to mislead consumers would strengthen Australia's approach to preventing alcohol-related harm, and would be consistent with guidance in the National Alcohol Strategy and National Preventive Health Strategy.

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