

How alcohol companies are using International Women's Day to sell more drinks to women

By [Carol Emslie](#)

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United Kingdom - [International Women's Day](#) on March 8 celebrates women's achievements across the world and calls for action to speed up gender equality. Many alcohol companies also see it as an ideal opportunity to market their products to women.



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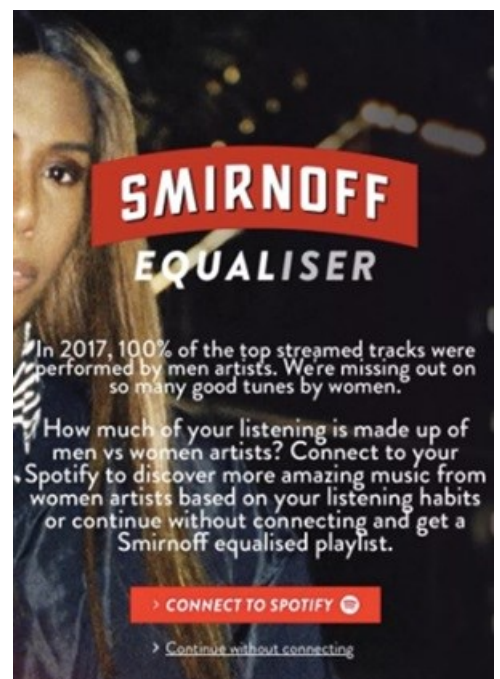
Diageo, the world's largest spirits business, is an [official supporter](#) of this year's international day. It has [launched](#) a series of tie-in videos, mainly of senior female staff talking about professional and personal challenges they face as women.

Diageo's Smirnoff brand is in the third year of an Equalising Music campaign to increase women's representation in the music industry. Originally [launched](#) to tie in with International Women's Day, Smirnoff [recently unveiled](#) BBC Radio One DJ Annie Mac to help spearhead the campaign.

For this year's international day, it is co-launching a new Spotify feature called [Smirnoff Equaliser](#) that enables users to see what percentage of female artists they have listened to in the last six months.

Elsewhere in the Diageo universe, don't be surprised to see toasts of Jane Walker Scotch to celebrate female diversity. This [limited edition](#) version of Johnnie Walker black label, featuring a striding woman in a top hat and boots, was [originally launched](#) to coincide with last year's International Women's Day, "as another symbol of the brand's commitment to progress". For each bottle sold, the company donated \$1.00 (£0.76) to women's organisations.

BrewDog, the Scottish-based brewer, has also used International Women's Day as a marketing vehicle. Last year it [repackaged](#) its Punk IPA brand as Pink IPA



Spirit of the times. Diageo

“Beer for Girls” as part of a campaign to supposedly highlight the gender pay gap and sexist advertising. The company later [expressed regret](#) after many people [attacked](#) the branding for itself being sexist. Perhaps unsurprisingly, BrewDog has not opted for a re-run, [but](#) numerous [other](#) brewers [have](#) launched [commemorative](#) beers for this year’s International Women’s Day – in many cases emphasising the role of female brewers.

[Women are](#) an important market to the alcohol industry. In the UK, for example, while [men still drink](#) significantly more than women, and suffer more harm as result, the gap has shrunk dramatically. Men born in the early 1900s [were](#) 2.2 times more likely than women to drink alcohol; three times more likely to drink in a way that suggested problematic use; and 3.6 times more likely to experience alcohol-related harms.

Men born in the late 1990s, on the other hand, are only 1.1 times more likely to drink, 1.2 times more likely to drink problematically and 1.3 times more likely to experience alcohol-related harms. Many marketers will probably see the remaining gap as proof of growth potential in women’s drinking.

The pitch

To appeal to women, alcohol companies have gradually developed different drinks, which [tend to be](#) sweet, pink, fruit flavoured or low calorie. Their marketing strategies evolved as well. Where alcohol marketers used to regularly sexualise and objectify women to sell alcohol to men, they now often align brands with fun, sophistication, female friendship and empowerment. Baileys, for example, targets millennial girls – and their mothers – with its “[Here’s To Us](#)” campaign. This [celebrates](#) the “power of female friendship” and encourages women to get together and toast one another.

According to research I co-authored, there is a clear link between alcohol and our gendered identity: both [younger](#) and [older](#) women show people who they are by what they drink and how they drink it. The alcohol industry is [well aware](#) of this and exploits it fully in its advertising.

The industry’s pitch to women’s empowerment is [particularly strong](#) in poorer countries, which are often less regulated and have lower advertising costs. For example, Diageo [markets](#) a fruit-flavoured alcohol drink called Snapp at women in parts of Africa. According to the strapline, “Snapp celebrates today’s woman: she is empowered, confident and stylish.”

Researchers have [argued that](#) this doesn’t only seek to attract female customers, but also to influence how alcohol is perceived by local women’s networks who might otherwise see female drinkers as distasteful. This echoes tobacco marketing campaigns over the years: a good example is Virginia Slim’s “You’ve Come a Long Way Baby” [campaign](#) in the late 1960s, which linked the product to women’s liberation.

The tension in whether alcohol marketing has women's interests at heart is possibly most pronounced around "[pinkwashing](#)", where companies engage in breast cancer awareness activities like the pink ribbon campaign while selling products that are [known to be](#) carcinogenic. For example, some Californian wine producers [give money](#) to breast cancer charities for every bottle of wine sold, fund clinical trials for women with breast cancer or pay for mammograms.

A [study from 2015](#) emphasised that alcohol is responsible for an estimated 8% of breast cancers worldwide. It raised concerns that pinkwashing "contributes to risk in the name of prevention" and "extends the marketing reach with links to charitable causes and access to young women, many of whom may already drink at risky levels".

Brand bandits

Alcohol brands [piggyback](#) on every notable date in the calendar, including [Mother's Day](#), [Valentine's Day](#) and even [Pancake Day](#). On one level, International Women's Day is just another of these marketing opportunities to normalise alcohol consumption. Yet linking alcohol brands with empowerment is particularly troubling, given that alcohol is a [leading global risk factor](#) for early death among women aged 15-49 years. In the UK, alcohol-specific death rates [increased](#) 21% for women between 2001 and 2017.

This year's [theme](#) for International Women's Day is #BalanceforBetter, a call to build a more gender-balanced world. To achieve this, the campaign suggests challenging stereotypes and raising awareness. In Scotland, where I am based, we have been running a social media campaign with Alcohol Focus Scotland [#dontpinkmydrink](#), to identify and expose examples of cynical alcohol marketing. When it comes to achieving true equality for women, raising rates of alcohol-related diseases and death rates to the same levels as men is one type of progress that we could really do without.

A Diageo spokesperson said: "Diageo's celebration of International Women's Day is linked to the strong focus we put on inclusion and diversity as a business. Forty percent of Diageo's executive committee are women; we've been ranked the fourth most diverse and inclusive business in the world by Thomson Reuters; are listed in the Bloomberg Gender Equality Index; and have been ranked as the best company in the UK for gender equality by Equileap. Our communications activity is focused on celebrating the women and men throughout our business, with the primary objective of engaging potential future employees."

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Mmmm liberation.

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