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# Not just the taste: why adolescents drink alcopops

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# Not just the taste: why adolescents drink alcopops

## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to determine the features of alcopops which make them attractive to Australian adolescents, which features are most important in determining choice of ready-to-drinks (RTDs) over other alcoholic drinks, and whether these vary by age and gender. **Design/methodology/approach** – Mixed methods study. Participants in Study 1 (focus groups) were 72 adolescents aged 12-17 from New South Wales, Australia; four groups each from Sydney (metropolitan area), Wollongong (regional) and Dubbo (rural); and in Study 2 (survey), 1,263 adolescents aged 12-17 recruited through schools, mall intercepts, and online. **Findings** – The predominant factor influencing preference for alcopops across both genders was taste, followed by alcohol strength and cost, although the association between price and choice was complex. Convenience was an important factor, including ease of carrying and concealing, as was the physical appearance (particularly for younger drinkers). Non-drinkers and experimental drinkers reported that advertising was a key influencer. **Practical implications** – These results elaborate on previous research, indicating that alcopops are appealing to young people for a number of reasons (including taste, cost and alcohol strength), many of which differ in importance depending on age and gender. Given that advertising was found to be a key factor in the preference for alcopops, alcohol-related media literacy education may help young people to resist these harmful persuasive messages. **Originality/value** – This study goes beyond previous research into the role of taste preferences to explore the complexity of reasons for adolescents' alcohol consumption. In doing so, this research provides the basis for future educational and policy interventions.

## **Keywords**

adolescents, why, taste, alcopops, just, drink, not

## **Disciplines**

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## **Not just the taste: Why adolescents drink alcopops**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to determine the features of alcopops which make them attractive to Australian adolescents, which features are most important in determining choice of ready-to-drinks (RTDs) over other alcoholic drinks, and whether these vary by age and gender.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Mixed methods study. Participants in Study 1 (focus groups) were 72 adolescents aged 12-17 from New South Wales, Australia; four groups each from Sydney (metropolitan area), Wollongong (regional) and Dubbo (rural); and in Study 2 (survey), 1,263 adolescents aged 12-17 recruited

through schools, mall intercepts, and online.

**Findings** – The predominant factor influencing preference for alcopops across both genders was taste, followed by alcohol strength and cost, although the association between price and choice was complex. Convenience was an important factor, including ease of carrying and concealing, as was the physical appearance (particularly for younger drinkers). Non-drinkers and experimental drinkers reported that advertising was a key influencer.

**Practical implications** – These results elaborate on previous research, indicating that alcopops are appealing to young people for a number of reasons (including taste, cost and alcohol strength), many of which differ in importance depending on age and gender. Given that advertising was found to be a key factor in the preference for alcopops, alcohol-related media literacy education may help young people to resist these harmful persuasive messages.

**Originality/value** – This study goes beyond previous research into the role of taste preferences to explore the complexity of reasons for adolescents' alcohol consumption. In doing so, this research provides the basis for future educational and policy interventions.

## Introduction

Ready-to-drink alcohol products (RTDs), commonly referred to as “alcopops”, have been a source of much controversy since their introduction in the mid-1990's (Forsyth, 2001). In Australia, there is increasing evidence that RTDs have become the drink of choice for young people (Colman and Colman, 2003). For example, a survey of 400 young people (aged 12 to 21 years) from Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney (Australian Divisions of General Practice, 2003) found that

45 per cent of females and 33 per cent of males reported an RTD as their last drink consumed; with a clear age-related decline (over 50 per cent of 12 to 14 year olds, 40 per cent of 15 to 17 year olds and 20 per cent of those over 18 years of age). More recent data showed that 25 per cent of 12 to 15 year olds and 34 per cent of 16 to 17 year olds who were "current drinkers" identified RTDs as their usual drink (White and Hayman, 2006). Studies in other countries have also found that the attractiveness of alcopops declines with increasing age (Center for Applied Research Solutions, 2006; Mackintosh *et al.*, 1997; Sutherland and Willner, 1998; Huckle *et al.*, 2008); and that female adolescents are the most likely to consume alcopops (Center for Applied Research Solutions, 2006; Mackintosh *et al.*, 1997; Huckle *et al.*, 2008; Roberts *et al.*, 1999; Brain *et al.*, 2000; MacCall, 1998; Romanus, 2000).

There is an increasing body of evidence to suggest that the preference for alcopops is a result of marketing strategies that entice youth into consuming these drinks (Mosher and Johnsson, 2005). However, the specific features of RTDs which make them attractive to youth are still poorly defined. The existing literature highlights "taste" – both the lack of evident alcohol taste and the similarity to familiar soft drink precuts (component parts) – as one of the most important attributes of alcopops (Australian Divisions of General Practice, 2003; Center for Applied Research Solutions, 2006; Mackintosh *et al.*, 1997; Hughes *et al.*, 1997; CHOICE, 2007; Copeland *et al.*, 2007). Other factors which have been identified in a small number of studies include portability and ease of concealment (Center for Applied Research Solutions, 2006; Hughes *et al.*, 1997); affordability (Hughes *et al.*, 1997); ability to control alcohol intake (Center for Applied Research Solutions, 2006); and perceived "fit" between the product/brands and the desired image of young people (Mackintosh *et al.*, 1997; Hughes *et al.*, 1997; Gates *et al.*, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2005).

However, there is a dearth of research which examines the relative role of these factors in young people's decisions to consume RTDs. The present research aims to determine the features of RTDs which make them attractive to young Australians (aged 12-17 years), which features are most important in determining choice of RTD over other alcoholic drinks, and whether these vary by age and gender. Study one aimed to address the question using a qualitative focus group method, and study two utilised quantitative survey techniques to provide further refinement of hypotheses relating to age and gender.

## **Study One**

### **Method**

This study consisted of 12 focus groups with young people aged 12 to 17 years ( $n=95$ ; 48 females and 47 males). The study protocol was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Adolescents were recruited by a commercial recruitment agency, using age and gender criteria to ensure quotas were met for these variables. Groups were separated by age (12 to 14 years and 15 to 17 years) and gender to ensure that participants were within groups similar to their naturally occurring friendship groups. Focus group discussions were conducted in Sydney (metropolitan area), Wollongong (regional) and Dubbo (rural); with four groups held in each location.

A discussion guide was used by the facilitator to address adolescent perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in relation to RTDs, and specifically reasons for choosing RTDs. The discussion guide was successfully piloted among a convenience sample of young people to confirm that the questions and activities were understood by respondents. A range of focus group techniques were used to ensure discussions maintained a high level of interest and

relevance to the participants. For example, participants were asked to rank products from most likely to consume to least likely to consume, and were also asked to “imagine” they were at a party and describe what types of people would drink the various products.

The focus group discussions were recorded and the audio files transcribed in full. While data saturation was reached after nine groups were conducted, all 12 groups were completed to ensure even representation of metropolitan, regional and rural adolescents of both genders. Transcripts were analysed with the objective of understanding the impact of different types of RTDs on alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours.

## ***Results***

While we did not directly ask the focus group participants about their own drinking behaviours, it was evident that the majority of the 15 to 17 year olds were experienced drinkers, with many referring to weekly (or more frequent) drinking episodes. Drinking in this age group took place predominantly at parties and friends' houses, as well as at family gatherings. In the younger groups (12 to 14 year olds) the majority of the participants were not regular drinkers; some were occasional light drinkers or had experimented with alcohol and others clearly identified as non-drinkers and expressed a dislike for alcohol.

## **Focus Group- ranking activity**

A total of 20 laminated A4 size cards depicting different branded alcohol products were used in the focus groups. The products were selected to represent the range and nature of alcohol available in NSW for each alcohol type (i.e. RTD, liqueur, spirit, beer and wine), and the varying nature of each type of alcohol (e.g. rum, vodka and bourbon RTDs) with a variety of mixers (e.g. milk, cola, and other flavoured soft drink) and a range of package types (e.g. cans,

bottles, and casks). Focus group participants were divided into two sub-groups, and asked to discuss the products and sort them into two piles: those which they would drink and those they would not drink, ranking the "yes" pile in the order of preference. The top five ranked drinks in each of the groups were collated for each of the 12 male and 12 female ranking groups (i.e. two sub-groups in each focus group, collated by gender). Of the 60 rankings for female participants (i.e. the top five for each of the 12 female groups combined), 40 of the 60 products chosen were RTDs.

From the ranking activity, clear differences between male and female participants were observed. The top four ranked drinks overall (in order) for female participants were Vodka Cruiser, Vodka Pulse, Vodka Mudshake and Smirnoff Vodka Black Ice, which are all RTDs. Two drinks (Baileys Irish Cream and Passion Pop Sparkling wine) were the equal fifth most popular drink across the female groups. RTDs were equally popular between the two age groups, however Smirnoff vodka (the only spirit ranked in the top five) and Smirnoff Ice (RTD) were more popular among the older groups, while drinks based on milk products (Vodka Mudshake and Baileys Irish Cream) were ranked higher by younger age groups, as were liqueurs (Midori and Baileys) and sparkling wine (Passion Pop).

In contrast to the female groups, male participants did not generally appear to favour particular types of alcohol products, ranking a variety including RTDs, spirits, liqueurs and beer in their top five. However, RTDs were still more popular than other types of alcohol for both age groups, and no major differences were apparent between younger and older participants.

It is important to note that for a number of the participants (particularly those in the 12 to 14 year old groups) this ranking was largely based on the physical appearance of the products depicted. Many of the younger participants had

not encountered these particular products previously, and therefore chose based on whether a product “looked nice”, as well as whether other members of their group had tried it before, and whether they had seen advertising for it.

### Reasons for choosing RTDs

The card sort activity (described above) identified many of the features of RTDs that made them appealing to young people. The following discussion integrates the card sort, the discussions following the card sort activity, and the subsequent discussions regarding what is (un)appealing about different alcohol products, and particularly RTDs. Eight key themes/reasons for RTD choice were raised by focus group participants (Table 1).

Table 1: Key themes/factors in drink choice raised in the focus groups

Male Groups	Female Groups
Taste	
<i>Good taste too.</i>	<i>It tastes practically like cordial</i>
<i>They're made to taste like things that kids have already drunk that they thought tasted good.</i>	<i>And you've got lots of different flavours, so it's nice</i>
<i>I like the energy drinks that are fizzy and stuff.</i>	<i>Because some alcohol tastes disgusting, and it tastes good</i> (15 – 17, female, Sydney)
<i>Yes, they taste heaps good.</i> (12 – 14, male, Wollongong)	<i>Cos they don't taste as much like alcohol</i> <i>like fizzy drink or alcohol</i> <i>A milkshake</i> (12 – 14, female, Dubbo)

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Strength

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*Depends. Depends upon your mood.*

*Get the stronger one when you like go to parties and stuff, but when you're just socializing doing weekend activities with family and friends you just get the weaker stuff so that you can pace yourself.*

*Practice on talking and having a good time with your friends, you binge up.*

*(15 – 17, male, Sydney)*

*Jim Beam in the can – you know how many you have had.*

*It's a little easier to manage if it's in the can.*

*Like how many you have had. You need a limit.*

*You can control your limit better if you know exactly how much you've had whereas in the bottle you are not sure if you have drunk....you know...*

*And in the cans you might just buy a six pack and that's all going to have and the bottle you might say Oh, I am only going to have a few drinks and then it's gone.*

*(15 – 17, female, Dubbo)*

*You're not going to get drunk really easily*

*I reckon they want to be cool, drinking, but they don't want to get too (drunk)...*

*Just walking around with a bottle in your hand*

*(12 – 14, female, Dubbo)*

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Convenience

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*It's too much effort like having cup*

*Just take them to a party. You*

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<i>and coke and another thing and having to mix it all up.</i>	<i>don't have to do anything.</i>
<i>Yeah, like trying to take hold of three things. Everyone just snatches it from where I am.</i>	<i>Goes with anything.</i>
<i>(15 – 17, male, Sydney)</i>	<i>You don't need glasses or.....</i>
	<i>It's already in there you don't have to mix it yourself.</i>
	<i>(15 – 17, female, Dubbo)</i>

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Easy to carry

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<i>It's easy. You don't have to carry two bottles at once.</i>	<i>With bottles you can screw the top back on with cans you have to hold your finger over the opening so that no one can put anything in it</i>
<i>You can carry more in your bag. Easier to hide.</i>	<i>These days anything can happen you could be talking to a friend and someone could put something in your drink</i>
<i>(15 – 17, male, Dubbo)</i>	<i>With the screw on you can put the bottle in the fridge, but the drink in the can will go flat</i>
	<i>(16 – 17, female, Wollongong)</i>

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Packaging

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<i>They look better.</i>	<i>It's green</i>
<i>Different colours.</i>	<i>Because it's colourful</i>
<i>There's more of a variety with the different flavours.</i>	<i>It looks yummy</i>
<i>(15 – 17, male, Dubbo)</i>	<i>(15 – 17, female, Sydney)</i>

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Price

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<i>They don't cost as much as the bottle.</i>	<i>(Double black. Why would you choose those?)</i>
<i>It would cost you about \$11 or</i>	<i>Because they are a little bit</i>

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*something.*

*They look innocent.*

(12 – 14, male, Wollongong)

*cheaper than the whole bottle of vodka,*

(15 – 17, female, Dubbo)

*They're like two and a half standard drinks in them.*

(...are you thinking about the price and the taste?)

*No, you go for the alcohol content as well.*

(15 – 17, male, Sydney)

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Influence of peers

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*You would judge a bit, if I see someone walk in with a few cruisers compared to someone with a massive bottle of Jim Beam I'd assume the person with the bourbon is there to get pissed and that they enjoy their alcohol and that they enjoy drinking to get drunk*

(And what about the person with the cruisers?)

*I'd guess that they'd given in to peer pressure or that they enjoy lollypop drinks*

(15 – 17, male, Wollongong)

*And you go to parties and everyone's drinking it, and you see heaps of people with it*

(15 – 17, female, Sydney)

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Impact of advertising

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*Because like that's the main one I*

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*think. You see it on ads all the time they're always there. I don't know if it's like the main alcohol drink.*

*Yeah...Like umm. Like TV when there is a lot of sport on. Rugby League and stuff like that.*

*Sponsored by Tooheys New. This comes up a few times.*

*Bundaberg Rum – there's a lot of ads with that bear.*

*Yeah.... It might think you, like it might, you know it might make you think like Oh maybe I should go and try it out.*

*(12 – 14, male, Sydney)*

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### *1. Taste*

Participants in all of the groups expressed the view that the taste of RTDs was a key driver of consumption choice. While the emphasis on taste was evident in both the male and the female groups, there were gender differences in the specific products preferred. Female groups focused on the sweeter soft drink flavoured products and those with a milk or cream base; male groups, while they also expressed a preference for soft-drink flavours that masked the taste of alcohol, focused on familiar cola tastes rather than sweetness per se.

### *2. Strength*

Alcohol strength was another driver of product choice that was expressed in all of the focus groups. Again, there were gender differences with females generally expressing a preference for products with a lower alcohol content and describing one of the key benefits of RTDs as the capacity to monitor and control their level of alcohol consumption. This perspective was even more prevalent in the 12 to 14 year old groups, where the participants saw the low alcohol content as enabling young people to achieve the social standing associated with alcohol consumption.

The male participants had a greater sense of ambivalence about the choice of low- versus high-strength RTDs, and expressed the view that the choice was often context-specific. That is, there were some social contexts in which they would want to remain in control of their alcohol consumption levels and others in which they would be seeking to drink as much alcohol as possible.

### *3. Convenience*

Convenience was raised in all of the focus groups as an important factor in drink choices, and a key reason for the popularity of RTDs in this age group. This was primarily related to the fact that there is no need to carry glasses, carry and “balance” multiple items, or mix spirits with soft drinks. RTDs were also seen as easier to share with friends and, conversely, to protect from being consumed by others.

### *4. Easy to carry (and to conceal)*

The ease of carrying, and concealing, RTDs was raised in the male focus groups – with issues including being safer to carry when you are drunk, easier to carry in your bag, and easier to hide (presumably from adults).

The young people – particularly those who were experienced drinkers – expressed a clear preference for bottled rather than canned drinks, with the key appeal being the ability to replace the lid on the bottle. This was seen as beneficial for several reasons – including safety concerns (i.e. to reduce the risk of drink spiking) and the ability to conceal the drink in a pocket or bag.

### *5. Product packaging*

Across all of the focus groups, the physical appearance of the products was raised as a key contributor to their appeal for younger drinkers. The female participants particularly emphasised the importance of colour in making a drink more appealing and saw this as an indicator that the product would taste good, although males also discussed the importance of having a range of colours and flavours to choose from.

### *6. Price*

Contrary to our expectations, price was not spontaneously raised as a choice factor in the majority of the focus groups – although when prompted, the participants did agree that price was a key influence on drink choices. Price was also the primary, and in most cases sole, reason given by participants for the high level of expressed preference for “Passion Pop” (a sparkling, flavoured sparkling wine available in a 750ml bottle).

However, the association between price and choice was complex, with a range of factors discussed, including the fact that the overall purchase price of a four-pack or six-pack of RTDs was cheaper than a bottle of spirits and, consistent with previous research, that the choice of a specific RTD was for many a trade-off between price and alcohol strength.

### *7. Influence of peers*

Again, few participants spontaneously mentioned peer opinions as an influencer of product choice, but agreed when prompted that they generally chose what “everyone else” was drinking and that they (particularly males) make inferences about others based on their drink choices.

### *8. Impact of Advertising*

Advertising was spontaneously mentioned by participants in a number of groups as a reason for their preferences for specific brands and products, prior to the facilitator raising advertising as a topic for discussion, particularly in the male groups. Among the younger males, who were largely current non-drinkers or experimental drinkers, advertising – prevalence and message content – was clearly articulated as a reason for perceiving a particular brand or product to be one they would like to try.

In order to allow integration of data generated from this focus group research (Study 1) and the survey research (Study 2) findings will be discussed at the conclusion of Study two.

## **Study Two**

A quantitative survey was designed to collect data on preferred products (and reasons for preferences). Respondents were also asked to rank the importance of six factors (identified in the literature review and focus groups) in their decision making regarding choice of alcohol products: “What it tastes like”, “What it costs”, “How easy it is to get”, “Alcohol strength”, “What it looks like”, and “What my friends drink”. Participants were also asked to provide dichotomous “yes/no” responses to indicate if they would be more likely to buy a pre-mixed alcohol

product if it was resealable, if it looked like a soft drink, or if it was an energy drink. Drinking behaviour was assessed using questions designed to be similar to the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT; Saunders et al., 1993) but relevant to frequency of drinking in young people (e.g. "How often in the last year have you had an alcoholic drink?"). A final draft of the survey was pilot-tested among a convenience sample of young people within the target age group and several questions were removed to reduce the response burden to less than ten minutes. A talk aloud session with pilot participants indicated that the survey was easily understood and answered by the target group, and that the survey demonstrated adequate face validity.

### *Data collection*

Adolescents aged 12 – 17yrs (n=1,263) were recruited to complete the quantitative survey, with a variety of methods utilised to gain a cross-section of participants:

- *Students from four independent high schools nearby, or within, the areas of Study One (n=307).*
- *Intercept surveys at shopping malls within each location to ensure inclusion of public school students, TAFE students or workers within the target group (n=263).*
- *Focus group participants from study one (and a parallel study) also completed the survey (n=154).*
- *Internet recruitment (paid advertising on FaceBook linked to an online survey) in order to reach a broader range of demographic groups and geographic locations. The response rate (the number of times the advertisement was clicked) was 43.2% excluding incomplete surveys (n=539).*

## *Data Analysis*

Data were entered into the statistical software package, SPSS (Version 15.0). Simple frequencies and descriptives were analysed for demographic and alcohol consumption behaviour questions and statistical tests were undertaken where appropriate. Several analyses were conducted for these results, depending on the nature of the data, including z-test for two proportions (e.g. to compare percentages of males and females who have consumed alcohol); chi-square analyses to assess the (in)dependence of variables from each other when variables were not dichotomous (e.g. ad liking, perceived RTD advertisement target group); and t-tests to compare means of two groups (e.g. average ranking for importance of alcohol elements by gender).

## Results

### *Demographics*

The majority of respondents (60.6 per cent) were female, and the average age was 15.4 years, which did not significantly differ between genders. Most were born in Australia (88.8 per cent) and spoke English at home (91.4 per cent). Other respondents were born in the UK, South Africa and New Zealand and 2.7 per cent were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Respondents reported a diverse range of religious affiliations, with "Catholic" the most common response (24.0 per cent).

### *Awareness and perceived popularity of RTDs*

In order to examine the perceived popularity of RTDs among 12 to 17 year olds, participants were asked whether they thought others their age regularly

consumed premixed alcoholic drinks, whether they know people who regularly consume them, and whether they have seen advertisements for RTDs. RTDs were perceived to be a popular drink of choice, with 82.5 per cent of respondents overall perceiving that people their age drank RTDs regularly (Table II). Older participants (15-17 years) were significantly more likely than younger participants (12-14 years) to report that others their own age regularly consumed RTDs; that they know other people who regularly consume RTDs; and that they had seen advertisements for RTDs. A significantly larger proportion of females than males thought that others their age regularly consumed RTDs.

Table 2: Participant perceptions of peer consumption of, and recall of advertising for, RTDs

	Overall		Age				Gender			
	(n=1263)		12-14yrs		15-17yrs		Male		Female	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<i>Do you think people your age regularly consume pre-mixed drinks?</i>	82.5	992	53.1	178	87.7	814*	75.5	376	80.5	616*
<i>Do you know other people who regularly consume pre-mixed drinks?</i>	79.1	952	64.1	205	84.6	747*	75.3	375	75.4	577
<i>Have you ever seen advertisements for pre-mixed alcohol?</i>	78.6	942	66.6	223	77.5	719*	76.9	383	73.1	559

\* p < 0.05

### *Product Characteristics*

When purchasing pre mixed alcohol drinks, taste was the most important factor, with 590 respondents ranking this as their top criterion (Table 3). When considering characteristics ranked either first or second, cost became the next most important factor followed by alcohol strength. The factor attributed the lowest amount of importance (most common factor ranked 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> combined) when purchasing pre-mixed drinks was what the product looks like.

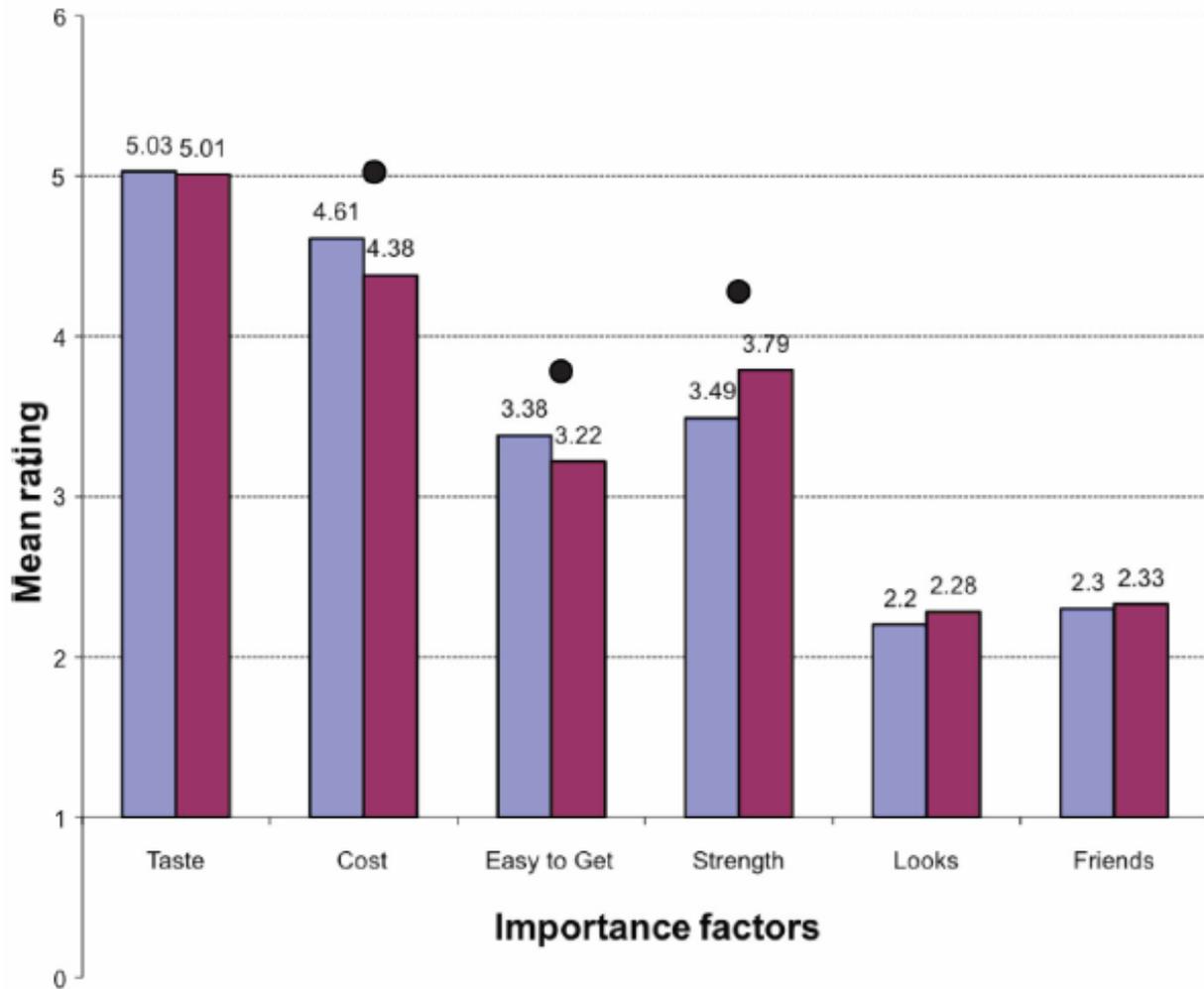
Table 3: Respondents' ranking of importance of factors when purchasing RTDs

	<b>1st</b>	<b>2nd</b>	<b>3rd</b>	<b>4th</b>	<b>5th</b>	<b>6th</b>
What it tastes like	590	229	156	83	43	30
Alcohol strength	217	157	215	256	146	139
What it costs	195	472	272	95	56	41
How easy it is to get	69	143	266	337	186	127
What my friends drink	37	63	120	184	328	399
What it looks like	23	67	102	175	372	391

Considering responses as scale data (ranging from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important)) for this question, it is possible to compare the averages for each alcohol characteristic assessed in the survey to determine if any differences between males and females exist. Data for these 'importance factors' were reverse scored, so that higher numbers indicated a *greater* estimation of importance. Males were more likely to rate cost ( $t_{(1129)} = -3.19, p < 0.00$ ) and "how easy it is to get" ( $t_{(1129)} = -2.01, p < .04$ ) as of high importance than females. Females were more likely to rate alcohol strength as an important characteristic than were males ( $t_{(1129)} = 3.11, p < 0.00$ ). Based on the focus groups discussions, we can reasonably conclude that for females 'strength' preferences generally relate to a preference for lower alcohol content (and for males to a preference

for higher alcohol content). These results are displayed graphically in Figure 1. There were no other significant gender differences for the 'importance' factors.

Figure 1: T-tests for gender differences across all "Importance factors"



- t- test is significant at  $p < 0.05$

Differences according to age were also examined using Pearson correlations (Table 4). Older participants reported greater importance of 'taste' and 'cost' of RTDs, and lesser importance of 'looks' and 'strength'.

Respondents were also asked whether they were more likely to buy a pre-mixed alcoholic drink if it was resealable, and 47.6% of respondents responded affirmatively; with females significantly more likely to report this ( $z = 4.612$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), as were older respondents (15-17 years old) ( $z = 4.969$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). T-tests

using age as a continuous variable served as further support for the latter result with older participants significantly more likely than younger participants to report they would buy RTDs if they were resealable ( $t_{(1157)} = 4.53, p < 0.00$ ).

Table 4: Pearson correlations between “importance factors” and age of participants

	Taste	Cost	Easy	Strength	Looks	Friends
Age	0.17**	0.06*	-0.01	-0.12**	-0.08**	0.01

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ;  $n=1131$

## Discussion

The results of the two studies helped to expand on the characteristics of RTDs which make them popular for 12 to 17 year olds. The predominant factor influencing the preference for RTDs across both genders was clearly taste, followed by alcohol strength and cost. Focus group results also showed that alcohol strength was a key driver of product choice, with females and younger drinkers generally expressing a preference for products with a lower alcohol content, whereas males aged 15-17 were more ambivalent about the choice of low- versus high-strength RTDs. Convenience was an important factor in drink choices, including the ease of carrying, and concealing, RTDs. The physical appearance of the products was another key contributor to their appeal for younger drinkers, including the importance of colour in making a drink more appealing and having a range of colours and flavours to choose from. The association between price and choice was complex, with the choice of a specific RTD for many a trade-off between price and alcohol strength.

Advertising was spontaneously mentioned by participants in the focus groups as a reason for their preferences for specific brands and products; and the non-

drinkers and experimental drinkers articulated that advertising was a key influencer for perceiving a particular brand or product to be one they would like to try. This finding concurs with other research suggesting that alcohol advertising (particularly that which appears on television) plays a substantial role in motivating consumption of RTDs (Gunter *et al.*, 2009).

It was clear from the focus groups that RTDs are the drinks of choice for young female drinkers, and to a lesser extent young males (who reported preferring spirits and beer as well as RTDs), with two-thirds of product choices in the card sort activity being RTDs. Survey results supported this finding, with females significantly more likely than males to think that others their age regularly consumed RTDs than males. Females were also less likely than males to place emphasis on the cost or ease of attaining of RTDs, and were more likely to rate (presumably lower) alcohol strength as important.

The apparent popularity of RTDs among female participants serves to support results of previous research, such as the role of their sweet flavour, soft-drink like appearance, and lower alcohol content. However, findings from both studies provide evidence that while RTDs are often perceived as predominantly 'girly' drinks, with particular appeal for females, there are effectively two types or categories of RTDs in Australia, each with appeal to a different target group. The stereotypical 'girly' RTD (fruit flavoured, bottled in a pretty colour, relatively low alcohol) continues to be the drink of choice for young females. However, rum- or bourbon-based, usually canned, RTD is seen as a 'boys' drink that serves a more concerning role for adolescent males; like the 'girly' version it tastes like the more familiar soft-drink base and thus is 'easy to drink' but its the higher alcohol content also makes it 'easy to get drunk' while still maintaining the 'macho' image typically associated with consumption of beer.

As expected, younger participants (those aged 12 to 14 years) were significantly more likely to place importance on the appearance of RTDs than their older counterparts. This partially supports the expectations of the study, that younger people are more influenced by the appealing appearance of the products. The tendency to rely on looks as a key cue in preference may reflect their limited experience with other features of the alcohol products. Younger participants were also significantly more likely to place importance on the strength of the alcohol in RTDs, which, from analysis of focus group discussions, appeared to be a preference for *lower* alcohol content. Contrary to expectations, taste was not considered to be as important to young participants as it was for older participants. Again, this may reflect the younger participants' limited experience with the taste of the products.

Results of these two studies elaborate on previous research, by indicating that RTDs are appealing to young people for a number of reasons, many of which differ in importance depending on age and gender. Future research should aim to solidify findings using a longitudinal design, in order to ascertain whether attitudinal preferences towards RTDs, gained early in adolescence, transfer into the behaviour of purchasing/consuming RTDs.

### *Limitations*

This study used an opportunistic data collection strategy, which means that our respondents are not a random sample of the underlying population. However, the use of a range of data collection methods in our survey study (internet, intercept, school-based and prior study participants) across a diverse range of geographic areas in both studies (metropolitan, regional and rural) increases the generalisability of our findings. It is important to note that while the focus group study included approximately equal numbers of males and females, the survey

sample consisted of more female (60%) than male respondents. It is possible that our sample may under-represent some ethnic/cultural groups, and did not include non-english speaking participants. It is possible that the responses of the 95 (7.5%) survey respondents who had previously participated in the qualitative study may have been influenced by their prior engagement with the topic; however, analysis confirmed these respondents did not differ from the remainder of the sample on any key variables.

Many of the younger participants (12-14 year olds) in Study 1 were non-drinkers or experimental drinkers, and their product rankings were based primarily on physical appearance of the products rather than their experience of drinking it. However, this increases (rather than decreases) the need to address the marketing of these products (packaging, advertising and distribution) as these factors are likely to be even more influential for younger teenagers who are beginning to experiment and are making decisions about whether (and what) to drink.

#### *Implications for health education*

The finding that 'taste' is the most frequently cited reason for the selection of RTDs raises concern regarding RTDs as "gateway drinks" which are initiated and accepted (because of their seemingly harmless, sweet flavour) in early adolescence, subsequently acting as a bridge to stronger alcoholic beverages in later years (Barnard & Forsyth, 1998). To counter this, educational campaigns based on a harm reduction approach have been suggested by others (Mackintosh, *et al.*, 1997). These would require the involvement of parents, who are seen to be particularly influential in determining sensible drinking behaviour (Mackintosh, *et al.*, 1997), and who are often the ones to supply these drinks to

their children (White and Hayman, 2006).

Given that advertising was found to be a key factor in the preference for alcopops over other alcoholic drinks, school-based media literacy programs targeting alcohol advertising have the potential to educate adolescents by encouraging them to counter persuasive messages (Mackintosh *et al.*, 1997). Alcohol specific media literacy training programs have been successfully utilised with third grade children, and these were found to be most effective in reaching females (Austin and Johnson, 1997), who tend to be the primary consumers of RTDs. Children receiving this kind of training (even just a single session) were found to hold fewer expectations about the positive consequences of alcohol, and also were less likely to choose an alcohol product (Austin and Johnson, 1997). In this way, even minimal alcohol-related media literacy education may help young people to resist the harmful persuasive messages.

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