



POLICY BRIEFING

The sale and marketing of zero-alcohol drinks

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Contents

- Summary and recommendations **3**
- About us **4**
- Introduction **5**
- The size of Ireland's zero-alcohol market **6**
- Why does the alcohol industry aggressively market their products? **7**
- Why does the alcohol industry use the same branding for zero-alcohol and alcohol products? **8**
- Why does zero-alcohol advertising pose a risk to children and teenagers? **12**
- Lack of regulation around sale **13**
- Zero alcohol: zero harm? – the health evidence **14**

Summary

- Zero-alcohol products are being marketed in areas that are deemed child-protected by the Public Health (Alcohol) Act (2018), exposing children to alcohol marketing which is a known driver of alcohol consumption in children and young people.
- These products normalise a culture of alcohol consumption, blur potential conflicts of interest in developing public health policies and put people in recovery at risk of relapse.
- There is little evidence for these products' health benefits as either as a solution for alcohol use or a harm reduction strategy for heavy alcohol users.

What's needed:

- Zero-alcohol products that use the same branding as their full-strength alternatives must be subject to the same marketing regulations under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act.

Recommendations

- Prohibiting the marketing of zero alcohol drinks to children and in the spaces designated by PHAA as children's environments. This will require an amendment to the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 to make explicit what was already implicit in the legislation.
- Banning brand sharing – i.e. advertising that associates zero alcohol products with the full-strength brands. This is in place in Norway.[47]
- Developing regulations around the sale of NoLos, in particular zero alcohol products which are not suitable for children to purchase.
- Monitoring the consumption of these products and impact on aggregated alcohol consumption to understand the public health implications of NoLos.

About us

Alcohol Action Ireland (AAI) was established in 2003 and is the national independent advocate for reducing alcohol harm. We campaign for the burden of alcohol harm to be lifted from the individual, community and State, and have a strong track record in campaigning, advocacy, research and information provision.

Our work involves providing information on alcohol-related issues, creating awareness of alcohol-related harm and offering policy solutions with the potential to reduce that harm, with a particular emphasis on the implementation of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. Our overarching goal is to achieve a reduction in consumption of alcohol and the consequent health and social harms which alcohol causes in society.

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Introduction

Many leading alcohol producers now have alcohol-free and low-alcohol variants, beverages known in different countries around the world as no, low, zero, alcohol free or non-alcoholic drinks, or simply NoLos. Despite constituting a small share of the alcohol market, recent years have witnessed aggressive advertising of NoLos.

Those products that are of particular concern to policy makers, politicians and parents are ones that share similar branding to their regular-strength counterparts, as they further normalise a culture of alcohol consumption, blur potential conflicts of interest in developing public health policies, and confuse and target children with advertisements in spaces which are child protected under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 (PHAA).

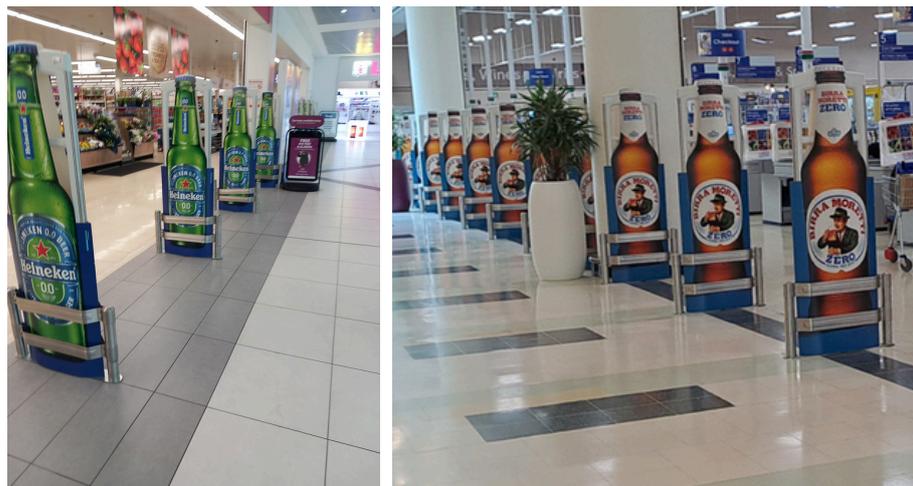
As previously witnessed with the tobacco industry promoting vaping as a smoking cessation tool, the alcohol industry portrays these products as a solution for alcohol use or a harm reduction strategy for heavy alcohol users, but currently, as highlighted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) there is little evidence for this.[1] The drinks, the WHO says, have possible drawbacks and implications, such as misleading minors, pregnant women, abstainers or those seeking to stop drinking about their actual ethanol content.[2] For example so called zero-alcohol or 0.0 products may contain up to 0.5% ABV. [3] [4] AAI has been recommending for some time that the Department of Health examines how the marketing of these products is contravening the letter and the spirit of the PHAA.

This briefing specifically sets out concerns around the marketing of zero-alcohol products, using the same branding as the master brand, in areas restricted under the PHAA and calls for the child protection measures in that legislation to be applied to this type of alcohol brand marketing.

“ As previously witnessed with the tobacco industry promoting vaping as a smoking cessation tool, the alcohol industry portrays zero-alcohol products as a solution for alcohol use or a harm reduction strategy for heavy alcohol users, but currently, as highlighted by the World Health Organisation, there is little evidence for this”

The size of Ireland's zero-alcohol market

The bulk of available 0.0 products are in the beer and spirit categories. Industry data notes that in 2023 0.0 beer products made up around 2% of the beer market in Ireland[5] and 0.0 spirits made up around 0.5% of spirit market.[6] Beer and spirits account for 43% and 23% respectively of the overall alcohol market.[7] Hence 0.0 products account for less than 1% of the total alcohol market.



Pictured: Alcohol branding (with a 0.0 tacked on) dominates the entrance and exit points of supermarkets, making it impossible for children and adults alike to avoid seeing



Why does the alcohol industry aggressively market their products?

We have known for some time alcohol advertising seeks to recruit new drinkers and increase sales among existing consumers of alcohol, including young people and children, as well those with alcohol use disorder and dependency.[8]

Alcohol is advertised to us in a variety of ways. Sponsorship at sports and music events, products promoted in our favourite movies and TV shows, and displays in shops to celebrate Valentine's Day, Father's Day, weddings, and birthdays. It is everywhere we look. Big alcohol companies spend millions linking alcohol with the things we love – watching football, GAA, or rugby, going to a gig, sharing a romantic meal. Their aim is to establish alcohol as an everyday item, an essential part of normal life.

The purpose of this is to normalise alcohol and influence when we start to drink, how much we drink, and how often we drink.[9] It was for this reason that the PHAA aimed to reduce the direct or indirect promotion of alcohol products, especially towards children.

Some of the most important ways the legislation sought to do this was through:

- **Section 14** which from November 2019, placed a ban on advertising within 200m of schools, public parks and on public transport;
- **Section 22** which from November 2020 restricted alcohol ads in shops to a designated zone
- **Section 15** which, from November 2021, placed restriction on alcohol advertising in, or on, a sports area or during events,
- **Section 19** which, from January 2025, introduced a daytime alcohol advertising broadcast watershed.[10]

As such, the broad suite of PHAA measures to reduce alcohol advertising are in places that children inhabit- near schools, near playgrounds, on trains and buses, in cinemas, in shops and supermarkets, on television and radio – and also on the field of play in sports.[11] The modest measures, watered down significantly through industry lobbying, are also intended to protect the population in general from drowning in a constant sea of alcohol ads.

Why does the alcohol industry use the same branding for zero-alcohol and alcohol products?

Just as the child protection measures in the PHAA came into force, big alcohol brands began brand sharing – that is advertising zero alcohol beers using the same parent branding, logos, colours and parent name, in the spaces where PHAA restricted alcohol advertising. Recent research from the UK indicates that 98 per cent of no/low beer sales in the off-trade come from products that share branding with a regular alcoholic drink, such as Heineken 0.0 and Heineken.[12]

It is of note that in the outdoor space where most of the PHAA restrictions are in place, zero alcohol ads made up 25 percent of the spend of alcohol brand advertising in 2022, up 31 percent from 2021, even though these products only make up around less than 1 percent of the total alcohol market.[13]

It is accepted that zero alcohol products are not suitable for children. Even the advertising industry funded body the Advertising Standards Authority says that zero alcohol product advertising should not be in children's media or proximate to schools[14], while researchers and public health bodies including the World Health Organisation have been drawing attention to these concerns in recent years.[15] So why then are they being advertised in the very areas which are deemed protected for children?

Zero alcohol advertising is not being pushed because the alcohol industry wants people to drink less, but because of the aforementioned restrictions on where the industry can advertise their products. Strong brand recognition, whether driven by advertising the brand through zero-alcohol or alcohol products, can result in higher sales and profit margins. Indeed, the marketers of Heineken 0.0

“ At the marketing industry's pre-eminent awards, the Heineken 0.0 marketers were keen to show that their efforts are increasing brand loyalty and also contributing to increased sales not just of 0.0 but also of the main product, Heineken”

have admitted as much in their submission to Effie Awards Ireland 2021. The Effie Awards, launched in 1968 by the New York American Marketing Association, are an awards program to honour the most effective advertising efforts.[16] It is the pre-eminent award in the industry, and the award recognises any and all forms of marketing that contribute to a brand's success.[17] Elaborating on their Heineken 0.0 campaign in Ireland, which won a silver medal at the Irish Effie Awards, the marketers were keen to show that their efforts are increasing brand loyalty and also contributing to increased sales not just of 0.0 but also of the main product, Heineken.[18]

The case study reference guide for the Heineken 0.0 campaign stated that advertising the non-alcoholic product "drove advocacy through excellent product experience and positive conversation around the brand." [19] This also had a "beneficial effect on Heineken main brand.". The submission further noted that the "success of the Heineken 0.0 campaign has compounded growth for the brand overall in a shrinking market.".[20]

Recent sports events have revealed these practices first hand as the alcohol industry has sought to put their brand at the centre stage of important sporting events. Research from the University of Stirling found alcohol brand references being shown at a rate of up to one every 8 seconds on the field of play during some high-profile rugby matches after the PHAA restrictions came into place.[21]

Not surprisingly this has paid off for the alcohol companies. Diageo has noted the success of their sponsorship of the Six Nations Rugby Championship which saw increased sales of both Guinness and Guinness 0.0 in stadiums with much larger volumes of full-strength Guinness compared with 0.0.[22] However, this is exactly what the PHAA was supposed to protect against, especially in terms of alcohol advertising being seen by children, because evidence shows that exposure to alcohol marketing encourages children to drink at an earlier age and in greater quantities than they otherwise would.[23]



This is why the PHAA had, in effect, child protection measures, in Section 15, to restrict alcohol advertising on the field of play in sports. In order to further protect children from the direct or indirect promotion of alcohol products, Section 19 of the PHAA legislated for a daytime broadcasting ban on alcohol advertising with no advertisements for alcohol products on television from 3am to 9pm and on radio on a weekday from 3pm to 10am the following morning.[24]

This modest measure, after a bizarrely long delay, finally came into operation on 10 January 2025. Yet, throughout Ireland's home games in the Guinness Six Nations Rugby Championship, we saw an advertisement for Guinness emblazoned on the field of play, with a 0.0 tagged on, broadcast to children watching in homes around the country.

We also witnessed alcohol advertising on the field of play during the Ireland's recent UEFA Nations League football matches, where Carlsberg displayed their logo behind both goal end lines, again, with a 0.0 tagged on. There was a particularly egregious example of a zero-alcohol product being advertised on the sports surface which is not even available on the market.[25] Forged Irish Stout 0.0 was prominently displayed on the boxing ring during a high-profile Katie Taylor fight in May 2023. Under PHAA rules, alcohol branding should not be displayed on the ring. The manufacturer claimed that the product was in development. This product is still not available (April 2025).

Not surprisingly, research indicates that shared branding successfully increases young people's brand familiarity and affects their brand recognition and brand awareness.[26] Brand sharing also means that children who see people drinking what appears to them to be alcohol – because of the same branding – will at a young age be conditioned to think differently about when and where it is appropriate to drink alcohol.



Indeed, international research revealed young people "...who saw the logos of companies that sell both alcoholic and zero-alcohol beverages were found to associate the logos primarily with the alcoholic versions of the products, indicating that zero-alcohol beverages are working as advertising vehicles for parent companies and their broader product portfolios.".[27]

The qualitative focus group study revealed that branding strategies seemed to successfully increase young people's brand familiarity and affected their brand recognition and brand awareness.[28] Resultantly, the research concluded that early exposure to alcohol brands and alcohol brand sharing increases brand familiarity and, among other factors, potentially affects drinking attitudes and purchase intentions of young people.[29]

Pictured:
Zero-alcohol products that
use the same branding as
their full-strength
alternatives proliferate in
areas that are deemed
child protected by the
Public Health (Alcohol) Act



Why does zero-alcohol advertising pose a risk to children and teenagers?

The evidence is clear – exposure to alcohol marketing is a cause of youth drinking.[30] As noted, the evidence also shows that this exposure to alcohol marketing encourages children to drink at an earlier age and in greater quantities than they otherwise would.[31]

This research is compounded by the fact that a new study has shown that the exposure of teenagers to zero-alcohol drinks marketing has a similar effect to exposure to alcoholic drinks.[32] Findings from the 'Alcohol advertising in disguise: Exposure to zero-alcohol products

prompts adolescents to think of alcohol' study suggest that, at least for adolescents, zero-alcohol drinks are best understood as members of the category of alcoholic drinks.[33]

Therefore, "exposure to zero-alcohol drinks within retail settings and through advertisements is thus likely to prompt adolescents to think of alcohol in a similar manner to when they are exposed to alcoholic drinks, suggesting that regulatory approaches that seek to limit adolescents' exposure to alcohol should also extend to zero-alcohol drinks.".[34]

As a result of the findings, the paper calls for urgent regulatory action to ensure that restrictions on alcohol advertising and availability to minors extend to zero-alcohol drinks.

“ A new study shows that exposure to zero-alcohol drinks within retail settings and through advertisements is likely to prompt adolescents to think of alcohol in a similar manner to when they are exposed to alcoholic drinks”

Lack of regulation around sale

Another issue regarding zero alcohol products is that there is no law preventing these drinks being sold to under 18-year-olds. It is understood that retailers, bars and pubs are generally treating such products as alcohol products and not selling to under 18s, but there is no legal framework around this. However, in the off-trade, retailers such as supermarkets and shops are displaying and advertising these products outside of the structurally separate area for alcohol products – saturating separate and safe shopping spaces with alcohol advertising.

The WHO states that: Policies and regulations about NoLos' availability, acceptability and affordability are lacking and evidence about their benefits is limited. Concerns have been raised about the impact of NoLos in reducing alcohol consumption and its associated harm and the possible drawbacks and implications, such as misleading minors, pregnant women, abstainers or those seeking to stop drinking about their actual ethanol content."

As well as needing to be regulated in terms of sales and marketing, there is a need to monitor the consumption of these products to fully understand who is consuming them and in what settings. While there is a paucity of data and research into sales of zero alcohol products, early information from Britain indicates that while there are increases in sales, there is no real evidence of substitution from alcohol. Furthermore, that research states there is insufficient clear evidence that NoLos are reducing alcohol-related harm.[35]

The WHO recommends that the alcohol by volume content of NoLos must be defined, harmonised and clearly labelled.

“ Early info from Britain indicates that while there are increases in 0.0 sales, there is no real evidence of substitution from alcohol. Furthermore, that research states there is insufficient clear evidence that NoLos are reducing alcohol-related harm”

Zero alcohol: zero harm? – the health evidence

Evidence about the benefits of zero alcohol products is limited, but concerns are many. As previously witnessed with the tobacco industry promoting vaping as a smoking cessation tool, the alcohol industry portrays these products as a harm minimisation tool, as a health solution for alcohol use, and as a harm reduction strategy for heavy alcohol users, but currently, as highlighted by the WHO there is little evidence for this.[36][37] Further research also highlights the lack of evidence to support a substitution hypothesis, particularly as alcohol companies frequently market zero-alcohol beverages as drinks to consume in new locations, such as in the workplace, or by previously non-drinking groups, such as pregnant women.

Academics and advocates state that this marketing approach implies to consumers that zero-alcohol beverages are to be consumed as additives to, not substitutions for, regular alcoholic beverages. For instance, research showed that during an advertisement campaign for Heineken 0.0, only 1 in 10 of Instagram posts showed the product in a traditional bar or pub setting, with the others showing the beverage being consumed in cars, the gym and the workplace.[38] In other words, some producers aim to encourage “additional” overall consumption of their zero alcohol products by encouraging a shift away from soft drinks and hot beverages and towards zero alcohol products.[39]

“ While companies state that they have expanded into the zero-alcohol market because they are committed to the long-term and sustainable reduction of harmful drinking, their marketing strategies of promoting consumption of 0.0 in new locations and scenarios shows that their claims are disingenuous”

This is problematic, as while companies state that they have expanded into the zero-alcohol market because they are committed to the long-term and sustainable reduction of harmful drinking, their marketing strategies of

promoting consumption of zero-alcohol beverages in new locations and scenarios demonstrates that their claims are disingenuous.[40] Indeed, Heineken representatives have explicitly stated an intention for Heineken 0.0 to take market share from soft drinks.[41]

Moreover, as Miller, Pettigrew, and Wright stated in their research paper, 'Zero-alcohol beverages: Harm-minimisation tool or gateway drink?' – there is additional concern that “the industry's rhetoric about zero-alcohol beverages may work to create a ‘halo effect’, whereby the perception of the industry as ‘doing good’ by expanding into zero-alcohol products may reduce negative attitudes towards the industry more broadly.”.[42]

Additionally, issues have constantly been raised about the impact of zero-alcohol product consumption for

people in recovery. Research has indicated that some of those working in the treatment space feel there might be risks to those with alcohol dependency, given the potential of zero-alcohol products to cause a relapse back into drinking.[43]

Concerns have also been raised by those in the recovery space about the marketing of these products as “zero-alcohol” or “0.0”, when, in fact, these products may have up to 0.5% ABV.

Indeed, defining what constitutes a zero-alcohol product is in itself confusing.

There is, in fact, no legal definition of what constitutes a zero-alcohol product, rather, the products are defined in opposition to the legal definition of what constitutes an alcohol product.

The PHAA defines an alcohol product using the definition contained within section 73 of the Finance Act 2003, that is, any drink with an alcoholic strength more than 0.5% ABV. Therefore, products with less than 0.5% ABV can be defined

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as “alcohol free”, even though they contain the presence of alcohol. While there are other products on the market with as little as 0.03% ABV, zero-alcohol products can have up to 0.5% ABV and still be described as “0.0” or “alcohol-free”.

Such a situation has led to accusations of deceptive marketing, and it is also important to note that broadcast advertisements for zero-alcohol products are accompanied by warnings to “drink responsibly”. This is a clear acknowledgement from the alcohol industry that zero-alcohol products are no ordinary product. Yet, these products are not subject to the same statutory restrictions as their alcohol master brands.

Different industrial and artisanal techniques are used to achieve low-alcohol content beverages. Therefore, regulations regarding the content of alcohol in beverages and strategies to monitor compliance are important, because they are the main reason for classification of the beverages and are central to their categorization and market labelling. Furthermore, analytical techniques with adequate sensitivity as low as 0.04% vol are necessary to determine the alcohol ranges necessary for classification.

In this narrative review, the definitions of no and low (NoLo) alcohol products are described and the differences in the legal definitions of these products in several regions of the world are highlighted. Currently, there is clearly confusion regarding the terminology of “no”, “free”, “zero”, “low”, “light”, or “reduced” alcohol products. There is an urgent need for global harmonization (e.g., at the Codex Alimentarius level) of the definitions from a commercial perspective and also to have common nomenclature for science and for consumer information.

“ Broadcast ads for zero-alcohol products are accompanied by warnings to ‘drink responsibly’. This is a clear acknowledgement from the alcohol industry that zero-alcohol products are no ordinary product. Yet, these products are not subject to the same statutory restrictions as their alcohol master brands”

Finally, the impact of zero alcohol beverages drinks on such health outcomes is a complicated area, and one where there is a paucity of research and data, especially in a domestic context. While some of the discussion of these drinks in news articles and by government focuses on their potential to reduce levels of alcohol consumption – by helping individuals to cut back or give up on drinking – this is a somewhat simplified picture.[44] [45] The reality is there is limited existing evidence that clearly demonstrates the health impacts from the use of zero-alcohol products.[46]

What is clear is that the alcohol industry is putting forward a message to government that these products are a solution to the harm caused by alcohol in an effort to resist the regulations on price, marketing and availability which are proven to reduce alcohol consumption and its harms. Therefore, until such time as the evidence exists, these products should not be pushed as a health-based alternative. In addition, further domestic research is required on who is purchasing and consuming zero-alcohol beverages and in what locations, and what impact this may have on alcohol consumption.

AAI recommends

Prohibiting the marketing of zero alcohol drinks to children and in the spaces designated by PHAA as children’s environments. This will require an amendment to the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 to make explicit what was already implicit in the legislation.

Banning brand sharing – i.e. advertising that associates zero alcohol products with the full-strength brands. This is in place in Norway.[47]

Developing regulations around the sale of NoLos, in particular zero alcohol products which are not suitable for children to purchase.

Monitoring the consumption of these products and impact on aggregated alcohol consumption to understand the public health implications of NoLos.

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