

Alcohol marketing in Ireland: Monitoring the Public Health (Alcohol) Act

Briefing paper one: First follow-up survey and the impact of COVID-19

Through the [Public Health \(Alcohol\) Act 2018](#), Ireland is introducing new controls on alcohol marketing. Implementation began in November 2019 with restrictions on alcohol advertising on public transport, advertising around youth-orientated environments (e.g., outdoor near schools), children's clothing that promotes alcohol (e.g., branded sport shirts), and advertising at the cinema (unless the film is 18+ or the advertising forms part of licensed premises in the cinema). Further controls will become mandatory in November 2021, including restrictions on some advertising during sporting events (i.e., in or on the playing area) and sponsorship of events either aimed at (or involving) children or involving driving. Other controls, including time limits on television or radio advertising ('watersheds') or restricting alcohol adverts to only factual information, are yet to be assigned commencement dates.

This briefing summarises the first set of findings from research led by the University of Stirling, in partnership with the Institute of Public Health, which is monitoring the impact of Ireland's new marketing controls. This briefing specifically examines changes in alcohol marketing awareness one-year after the initial advertising restrictions were implemented in November 2019 (described above). This research also examines to what extent the COVID-19 pandemic, including closure of some public spaces and mandated social distancing, impacted on alcohol marketing awareness. [Further details are reported in the corresponding research paper, which is available open access.](#)

THE STUDY

The data comes from two repeat cross-sectional surveys conducted with adults (18+) in Ireland. The first survey ($n=1,007$) was conducted in October 2019, before any of the new marketing controls were implemented. The second survey ($n=1,020$) was conducted in October 2020, both after some initial controls became mandatory and during the COVID-19 pandemic¹. All participants were recruited online by YouGov, a market research company.

In both surveys, participants were asked where, and how often, they recalled seeing alcohol marketing across a variety of activities in the past month. Answers could range from 'Everyday' to 'Not in the past month' or 'Not sure'. In each survey, participants also self-reported alcohol consumption using an established screening tool². From their responses, it was possible to identify those who were current drinkers and, among current drinkers, those consuming at higher-risk³. [Further details are available in the corresponding research paper.](#)

KEY FINDINGS (full details in the paper)

- For 9/13 of the marketing activities measured in both waves, there were decreases in the proportion of adults who recalled any awareness in the past month and how often they recalled seeing them.
- This included decreases in awareness for activities that were at least partly restricted under the new controls: advertising on public transport, posters and billboards, and cinema advertising.
- There were also decreases in awareness for other activities not yet subject to new controls, including advertising in newspapers and magazines, television advertising, and sport or event sponsorship.
- Reporting any awareness in the past month was unchanged for social media advertising, adverts on catch-up TV or streaming services, and special price offers.
- In both waves, 94% of adults recalled seeing at least one instance of alcohol marketing in the past month and, among current drinkers, increased marketing awareness was associated with increased likelihood of reporting higher-risk drinking and at least monthly heavy episodic drinking.

Version 1.6; 12th October 2021; All analyses performed by researchers at the University of Stirling

¹ Data were collected 8-18th October 2020; See extant literature for details of COVID-19 controls measures in effect at that time.

² The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – Concise (AUDIT-C).

³ Higher risk = Current drinkers scoring ≥ 5 on AUDIT-C; Lower risk = Current drinkers scoring ≤ 4 on AUDIT-C.

POLICY INTERPRETATION

- Given the COVID-19 context, it is prudent to interpret changes in marketing awareness with caution.
- There were reductions in awareness for the marketing activities subject to new controls. However, opportunities for consumers to be exposed to these activities, and their cost-effectiveness and attractiveness to marketers, was also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., reduced use of public transport and reduced footfall at, or closure of, cinemas).
- COVID-19 also impacted on wider awareness of marketing. For example, decreased awareness of sport and event sponsorship is likely to be associated with the cancellation of events or the requirement to have either no spectators, or only limited numbers, during the follow-up period.
- Nevertheless, awareness of alcohol marketing remained high among adults and some activities were largely unaffected by the COVID-19 pandemic, namely special price offers, social media advertising, and adverts on catch-up TV or streaming services.
- It is plausible that both Ireland's initial controls, and the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, contributed to reductions in awareness of alcohol marketing. Future waves from this survey will provide longer-term evaluation to determine the relative contribution of each, as well as examining the impact of new controls as they are implemented.

LIMITATIONS

The survey participants are from an online market research panel, which may not be fully representative of all adults in Ireland. The data are cross-sectional and do not show causal associations between marketing awareness and consumption. The data are self-reported and therefore subject to errors in recall, for example under-reporting marketing awareness or attributing exposure to the incorrect marketing activity. Survey space is limited and so data were not collected on either change to personal circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have also impacted on opportunities for marketing exposure (e.g., working from home or cocooning), or wider determinants of consumption (e.g., peer influence). [Further details concerning limitations are reported in the research paper.](#)

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This briefing is based on research funded by the Institute of Public Health, the Society for the Study of Addiction (SSA), and the University of Stirling. The research was led by:

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