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Research Paper

"I just saw the alcohol brand, I never really thought of the zeros": Young people's views of NoLo and alibi alcohol sponsorship

Richard I. Purves [a,*], Jack G. Martin [a], Piotr Teodorowski [a], Olivia Brown [b]

[a] Institute for Social Marketing and Health, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, United Kingdom
[b] University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol companies frequently use sports sponsorship to maintain high visibility, even in jurisdictions with advertising restrictions. Strategies such as *alibi marketing* - using brand-associated slogans, colours, or fonts in place of explicit brand names, and *NoLo marketing* - promoting zero-alcohol variants of core brands, enable continued brand exposure. This study investigates young people's awareness of alcohol sponsorship and their perceptions of alibi and NoLo marketing in sports contexts.

In December 2024, ten online focus groups ($N = 44$) were conducted with participants aged 11–17, stratified by age (11–13, 14–15, 16–17) and sex (male/female). Participants showed strong awareness of alcohol brands, with many recognising alibi sponsorships and associating them with full-strength alcohol products. Alibi strategies were perceived as deliberate efforts to circumvent regulations. NoLo sponsorships were rarely identified as marketing for non-alcoholic beverages; instead, branding similarities to alcohol products led participants to view them as covert advertising. Many recommended clearer differentiation to avoid misleading messaging.

Findings highlight the pervasive impact of alcohol marketing on young people, even in partially restricted environments. Alibi and NoLo tactics sustain alcohol brand presence in sport, potentially normalising alcohol use and undermining policy efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm. These insights underscore the need for more comprehensive regulatory frameworks that address indirect marketing strategies and prioritise youth protection in sport sponsorship.

Introduction

Alcohol consumption among young people remains an important global public health concern (WHO, 2024). Despite age restrictions on alcohol sales and consumption in many countries, young people are regularly exposed to alcohol marketing across multiple channels, including television, digital platforms, social media, sponsorships, and product placements (Anderson et al., 2009; Critchlow et al., 2019). These marketing efforts often portray alcohol in a glamorous and socially desirable context, potentially influencing the attitudes, expectations, and drinking behaviours of young audiences (Giesbrecht et al., 2024). Research consistently shows a strong association between exposure to alcohol marketing and early initiation of drinking, higher levels of consumption, and greater likelihood of engaging in risky drinking behaviours. A longitudinal study by Anderson et al. (2009) concluded that exposure to alcohol advertising is causally related to adolescent drinking initiation and progression. Similarly, Jernigan et al. (2017) demonstrated that young people who are more receptive to alcohol marketing are more likely to initiate drinking and binge drink. Alcohol companies have long invested in sports sponsorship to enhance brand visibility and consumer loyalty. Unlike traditional advertising, sponsorship seamlessly integrates alcohol branding into the sports experience, making it more appealing (Purves & Critchlow, 2020). Research has found an association between exposure to alcohol sport sponsorship and increased consumption, including among young people and adult sportspersons (Brown, 2016).

In response to rising levels of alcohol-related harm, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that countries adopt statutory controls on alcohol marketing, including sponsorship (WHO, 2013). Many European nations have implemented regulations to limit young peoples' exposure to such advertising (Purves et al., 2022). Norway was an early adopter, introducing a nationwide ban on alcohol advertising in 1975 due to concerns about its impact on young people (Rossow, 2021). France followed with the Loi Évin in 1991, which restricts alcohol

* Corresponding author at: Institute for Social Marketing and Health, University of Stirling, FK9 4LA, United Kingdom.
E-mail address: r.i.purves@stir.ac.uk (R.I. Purves).

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advertising in youth-oriented media and strictly regulates advertising content, including a ban on alcohol sponsorship of sporting events (Gallopel-Morvan et al., 2017). More recently, the Scottish Government highlighted alcohol sponsorship as a key concern in its 2022 consultation on restricting advertising and promotion, emphasising its role in increasing brand recognition and desirability among young people, as well as its link to early drinking initiation (Scottish Government, 2022). However, as regulatory efforts evolve, emerging challenges such as covert marketing tactics must be carefully addressed in future legislation.

The increasing prominence of NoLo sponsorship

One of these challenges is the rising prominence in the availability and consumption of alcohol-free and low-alcohol drinks (NoLo), driven by changing social norms, health consciousness, and industry responses (Holmes et al., 2024). In the United Kingdom (UK), low-alcohol drinks are typically defined as beers, ciders, spirits, pre-mixed drinks, or wines containing ≤1.2 % alcohol-by-volume (Department of Health & Social Care, 2018). A systematic review reported that the NoLo market in the UK was valued at £255 million, and it is projected to rise to £432 million in 2027 (Waehning & Wells, 2024). Sponsorship is now being redefined by the emergence of NoLo alternatives seeking to maintain brand visibility while aligning with socially responsible messaging. NoLo brands, including Heineken 0.0 % and Corona Cero, are not merely sub-brands, they represent a strategic pivot in marketing, aiming to capture younger demographics who prioritise moderation, wellness, and authenticity (Marsh & Jones, 2023). Sponsorship, particularly in sports and music, serves as a vital avenue for these brands to maintain cultural relevance and brand loyalty without triggering the same regulatory and ethical scrutiny faced by traditional alcoholic beverages.

Studies show that NoLo brand sponsorships can still foster brand recall and influence consumer preferences (Nicholls, 2023). Debates persist around the potential "halo effect" of such sponsorships, where even non-alcoholic variants may promote the core alcoholic product (Miller & Wright, 2024). A study with Australian teens found that exposure to NoLo advertising prompts adolescents to think of alcohol in a similar manner to when they are exposed to alcoholic drinks (Bartram et al., 2025). Furthermore, regulatory bodies are grappling with whether these marketing practices constitute a loophole in alcohol advertising restrictions (Anderson & O'Brien, 2023).

Using alibi marketing to maintain brand visibility

Another strategy employed by alcohol companies to maintain their brand visibility in restrictive environments is the use of alibi marketing (Critchlow, Holmes & Fitzgerald, 2025). This practice involves the use of brand colours, logos, or slogans that evoke alcohol brands without explicitly mentioning the brand name, allowing sponsors to technically comply with advertising regulations while still maintaining a market presence (Purves et al., 2017). The concept of alibi marketing is often observed in countries where direct alcohol advertising is banned or tightly regulated, such as France. In such contexts, brands utilise suggestive symbols or phrases from their marketing campaigns to create mental associations with the core alcohol brand. This method not only challenges the effectiveness of advertising restrictions but also raises ethical questions about legitimising alcohol marketing to young people.

Studies have shown that even indirect exposure to alcohol branding can significantly increase brand recall and affect drinking intentions among adolescents (Noel et al., 2017). Critics argue that such strategies undermine public health efforts to reduce alcohol consumption and normalise drinking culture, particularly in sports settings where youth viewership is high (Critchlow & Purves, 2023; Thomas et al., 2012). In response, some countries have pushed for broader interpretations of advertising laws to include these indirect strategies, while others still struggle to close the loopholes exploited by alibi marketing (Hastings et al., 2010; Purves et al., 2022). However, there remains significant gaps in our understanding of young people's views on alcohol sponsorship, including their views on NoLo and alibi marketing.

This study aimed to gather evidence on the extent and nature of young people's exposure to alcohol sponsorship, including where they see it, how much they see and what they think about it. It also explored young people's views of alibi and NoLo marketing, including whether they differentiate between NoLo variations of products and their regular-strength variants.

Methods

Study design

This study employed a qualitative design using online focus groups to explore the perceptions of young people regarding alcohol brand sponsorship, including alibi and NoLo marketing. The approach was chosen to allow for in-depth discussion and insight into participants' awareness, interpretations, and attitudes and to understand why young people hold particular views or attitudes towards alcohol sponsorship in sport - something that fixed survey options cannot adequately capture. Qualitative research also offers more flexibility to explore unanticipated ideas or themes. Focus groups were chosen to give voice to the young people, acknowledging them not just as data points but as agents with reflective perspectives. This is especially important for ethical research involving youth on sensitive topics like alcohol. Focus groups allow for peer interaction and to establish social norms. Groups allowed participants to build on each other's ideas, prompting deeper reflections and unexpected insights that would not emerge in isolated interviews. We also wanted the young people to feel at ease in a peer group setting rather than a formal one-to-one interview with a researcher.

Groups were conducted online due to project timescales and budget. Online groups also allowed for members of the research team based in Scotland and England to conduct the groups.

Participants

A total of ten online focus groups were conducted with forty-four young people aged 11–17 years residing in Scotland. Participants were recruited through a professional market research agency with experience in engaging young people for qualitative research. To ensure diversity and facilitate age-appropriate discussion, focus groups were stratified by both age and sex (Table 1). The three age cohorts were: 11–13 years, 14–15 years, and 16–17 years. Groups were organised separately for male and female participants within each age band to support open dialogue and to account for potential differences in gendered experiences and interpretations.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via a market research panel. Screener questions were designed in collaboration with the research team and

Table 1
Details of focus group participants.

Group	Country	Age	Sex	Number of participants
1	Scotland	11–13	Female	5
2	Scotland	11–13	Male	5
3	Scotland	11–13	Female	4
4	Scotland	14–15	Male	4
5	Scotland	14–15	Female	3
6	Scotland	14–15	Male	4
7	Scotland	14–15	Female	4
8	Scotland	16–17	Male	5
9	Scotland	16–17	Female	5
10	Scotland	16–17	Male	5

sent out to adult panel members who had children who met the recruitment specifications (living in Scotland, English-speaking and aged between 11–17). Those who expressed an interest in their child taking part were screened by the recruitment team via telephone where they were provided with information about the study and checked for articulacy. All appropriate information sheets and consent forms were then provided via email. Written consent was obtained from both the parents/guardians of the young people for those aged 11–15 and only from the young people aged 16–17. Details and signed consent forms were then provided to the research team via a password protected database.

Procedure

All focus groups were conducted online via a secure video conferencing platform (Microsoft Teams) to ensure accessibility and compliance with health and safety protocols. The market research agency provided an online host who arranged the setup of the groups, permitted participants entry to an online waiting room, and called any participants who had not joined to check if they were having any issues and to ensure they were still planning to attend. The host then allowed all participants into the session along with the moderators so that the meeting could begin. In line with Market Research Society (MRS) guidelines, all parents were advised to chaperone their child to the research session, and particularly for the younger age groups that they should be present in the room during the session.

Each group session was facilitated by a minimum of two trained researchers experienced in conducting qualitative research with young people. Moderators were Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked to provide extra reassurance to parents.

Sessions followed a semi-structured format guided by a topic guide designed to explore key themes related to branding and sponsorship. The topic guide was developed by drawing on existing literature related to alcohol advertising (Purves et al., 2018), marketing exposure (Jones et al., 2022), and sponsorship effects (Boelsen-Robinson et al., 2022). These related studies provided a foundation for identifying key themes and discussion areas. This approach ensured that the guide was grounded in relevant evidence while allowing flexibility for participants to express their own interpretations and experiences. Researchers used a series of slides containing images to prompt discussion and elicit responses. We used stimulus materials such as examples of brand logos and advertisements, to trigger discussion and elicit organic reactions. We have previously used this method in studies to explore young peoples' responses to alcohol marketing (Jones et al., 2022; Purves et al., 2018). The topic guide covered the following areas: General awareness and recognition of brands; Understanding and perceptions of sponsorship practices; Views on alcohol sponsorship; Reactions to "alibi" sponsorship (i.e., sponsorship using non-alcoholic brand variants to represent alcohol brands); Perceptions of sponsorship involving no- and low-alcohol products. The visual prompts were selected to reflect real-world branding examples in sports and entertainment contexts, and to stimulate authentic responses (see Appendices). The brand logos featured in Appendix A were purposefully selected to represent a diverse range of products and services. Alcohol brand logos were included on the basis that they are among the most widely consumed alcohol brands in Scotland, have a history of sponsoring sporting or cultural events, and utilise visual identities (logos) that do not include the full brand name. To avoid priming effects, topic guides were structured to first explore general awareness of various brands (fast food, electronics, sportswear and alcohol) before later sections focused exclusively on alcohol brands. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 to 90 min. All focus group sessions were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To ensure accuracy and fidelity to participants' original speech, transcripts were reviewed alongside the recordings by the research team. Identifying information was removed during transcription to maintain anonymity.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel (GUEP 19806). In obtaining this approval, we considered the potential risk that by discussing and showing examples of alcohol marketing, including sponsorship, that we are inadvertently exposing the young people to alcohol brands and products in a way they could find appealing. This was mitigated by explaining why we have shown them the images and by verbally communicating the risks associated with alcohol use and particularly those associated with underage alcohol use at the end of the group. We also provided the participants with a link to information on the health risks of underage alcohol use.

Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was employed to analyse the focus group data, as it offers a structured yet flexible method for identifying, categorising, and interpreting patterns and themes within textual data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). This approach was particularly well-suited to exploring young people's subjective experiences and meaning-making processes in response to visual prompts of alcohol sports sponsorship, enabling the analysis to capture both explicit comments and more nuanced insights into branding recognition, attitudes, and perceptions of alcohol marketing within a group dialogue setting.

The analysis proceeded in several iterative stages. First researchers independently read and reread the transcripts to immerse themselves in the data and to gain an initial sense of the breadth and depth of content. An initial coding framework was developed deductively, based on the study's topic guide (e.g., brand awareness, sponsorship, alibi sponsorship, no/lo alcohol branding), and inductively, to capture emergent ideas from the data. Coding was conducted using NVivo 20 software to aid organisation and retrieval. Codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected patterns of meaning across different focus groups and participant demographics. Through an iterative process of comparison, discussion, and refinement among the research team, higher-order themes were developed. These themes encapsulated the key insights and perspectives voiced by participants across the different focus groups. To enhance credibility, multiple researchers were involved in the coding and theme development stages.

Results

High levels of brand awareness

Groups began with a short exercise to explore participants' level of familiarity with various brands and determine whether they were able to identify brand names and products from their logos (see Appendix A). Participants were shown a slide with twelve brand logos and invited to volunteer which logos they recognised and what types of products they sold. Participants in all groups demonstrated a high level of brand awareness and were able to recognise almost all brands from their logos including various fast food, electronics and sportswear brands.

R4: Yes, I recognise all of them.
Int: All of them. Does everybody recognise all of them?
R2: I recognise most of them.
R4: Apart from ten (Vans shoes) (Group 7, 14–15, Female).

The logos of three alcohol brands were included on the first slide. Most participants, including those in the youngest age groups, were able to recognise the alcohol brands from their logos (Tennent's, Guinness and Foster's) and describe them as alcohol brands. Tennent's (a Scottish beer brand) was the most recognised alcohol brand with many participants describing it as an 'alcohol' or 'beer' brand.

Int: Did anyone recognise number 4?
R2: Is it Tennent's?

Int: Yes. Do you know what Tennent's is?
R2: Alcohol, I think (Group 5, 14–15, Female).

Participants then discussed where they had seen these alcohol brands before and how often they were exposed to them. Sports sponsorship was mentioned by most groups as one of the main sources of exposure to alcohol brands with many stating that they see alcohol sponsorship "every time" or "most of the time" when they watch sports on television (Group 6, 14–15, Male). Participants aged over 14 were able to cite specific sporting bodies and teams which had alcohol sponsors. For example, Guinness and Tennent's were recognised by many due to their association with the Scottish rugby union team and the Six Nations rugby union championship.

R1: Aye, rugby, and Scotland and the national team sponsor Tennent's.
Int: Yeah, and what kind of sponsors do you see at rugby? We've got Tennent's there for Scotland; can you think of anything else?
R2: Guinness.
Int: Guinness, yeah.
R2: Six Nations, yeah (Group 6, 14–15, Male).

Groups mentioned that Guinness and Tennent's were highly visible during rugby union matches and that they had seen advertising around the stadium and on the pitch. Male participants were more likely to recall specific sponsorship arrangements than female participants, in part due to their greater familiarity with football and rugby teams and events.

Recognising alcohol brands from their logos

Before being shown specific slides focusing on alcohol sponsorship, groups were shown a slide which featured examples of alibi marketing for Carlsberg, Heineken and Guinness (Appendix B) to determine whether they would be able to recognise the alcohol brand from various signifiers such as the logo, colours or slogan. Without prompting, all groups recognised the red star and green background as the logo of Heineken, including the youngest age groups.

R4: Looks like Heineken, it has got the red star the same colour green.
R4: Yes, it does.
R1: Beer.
Int: That is a what kind of brand?
R1: Beer company
R4: A beer brand (Group 1, 11–13, Female).

Most groups also recognised Guinness alibi marketing from the example on the slide which featured a large advert in the centre of the rugby pitch with the word 'Greatness' instead of the brand name. Again, participants described the colour scheme and font as being very similar to the Guinness core branding, but some participants also drew on their pre-existing knowledge of Guinness sponsoring the Six Nations to recognise the brand.

R: On right, Guinness.
Int: Yeah, and why do you see that?
R: Because it's black and the writing.
Int: Did anyone else see that one as Guinness?
R: Yeah.
Int: Yeah? Same reasons or anything else?
R: I just already knew Guinness sponsored the Six Nations (Group 6, 14–15, Male).

Participants thought that most people would be able to recognise the alcohol brands from the alibi marketing. Some believed that adults would already be familiar with the alcohol brands so would be able to recognise parts of their logo or slogans quite easily. Participants suggested that only very young children might have difficulty recognising the brands and this was mainly due to their lack of familiarity with the brands.

Int: Do you think anyone wouldn't know what they are advertising?
R3: Smaller children maybe. Maybe they would learn, but initially no.
R2: If you didn't know what it was you might still get the kind of idea of it. You might not know the brand, but you would know what it is, if that makes sense? (Group 7, 14–15, Female).

Some participants struggled to understand why companies would use alibi marketing instead of using their brand name, arguing that this type of marketing might be less effective in promoting the products due to some people not recognising the brands.

Int: So, do you think it would be less effective maybe, or more effective?
R1: Yeah, less effective.
R3: If you're not seeing the brands, it's not really, there's no real point in it because some people won't recognise whatever you put instead of the brand name. Some people won't recognise what it is (Group 4, 14–15, Male).

Why companies use alibi marketing

When asked why they thought companies might use this type of marketing, some participants mentioned that companies might use alibi marketing to continue to advertise in countries which have restrictions on alcohol marketing. Some felt this would be "better" because young people might not recognise the brands whilst others felt that this was a way for the alcohol companies to circumvent existing regulations, describing it as "sneaky".

R4: I think it is better because some people won't know what it, we still know what it is because we are older, but younger children won't know what it was. At the same time, again, it is still alcohol being promoted, so it is still wrong.
R2: It is quite sneaky for the brand if they have said that they can't be advertising they just change it. Even if you don't know the brand name from the slogan or anything you still know what it is going to be talking about. You might not necessarily, if you were going to go buy something you have just seen it, you might not buy that brand, but it might give you the idea to buy something at all (Group 7, 14–15, Female).

Participants acknowledged that even if the advertising doesn't lead to choosing that specific brand, it can still influence overall consumption. This reflects the idea that brand exposure can prompt purchasing behaviour in general, not just brand loyalty, illustrating a sophisticated awareness of marketing psychology and regulatory loopholes. Female participants tended to be more overtly critical of this type of advertising than male participants, arguing that alcohol companies should not be permitted to exploit loopholes in legislation.

Participants discussed whether they thought alibi marketing should be permitted to continue in countries where restrictions on alcohol marketing are already in place, such as France. Most agreed that alibi marketing was being used to circumvent current regulations and to exploit loopholes in the law.

I think that it's good that the rule in France is in place, but I don't think the loopholes, even though it's not like properly being shown, like the brand name isn't shown, you do think about it more, because you're thinking, what could that be advertising? (Group 5, 14–15, Female).

Influencing consumption habits on a subliminal level

The groups were then shown various slides featuring examples of sponsorship including pitch-side advertising, front of shirt sponsorship,

promotional packaging, and magazine adverts. These examples featured alcohol brands such as Heineken, Guinness, Estrella and Stella Artois alongside other non-alcohol brands such as Red Bull, Betway and Audi. Participants described other examples of alcohol sponsorship they had seen with football being the most cited sport followed by rugby.

Int: How often would you say that you see it?
R1: Yeah, here's loads of things (…) like, football teams have on the back of their strip maybe brands with alcohol. I think Magners [Irish cider brand] does Celtic [football club], so things like that, you're going to see that a lot.
Int: Yeah. [respondent 2], do you think it's quite common?
R2: I think it's quite common. I watch quite a bit of basketball, and I don't see it as often, but I would imagine that it's probably more popular in football, especially in Scotland (Group 8, 16–17, Male).

Participants demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of marketing activities, listing various examples, and were able to describe the main reasons why companies used sponsorship to market their products. For example, one participant discussed how alcohol sponsorship works on an almost subliminal level to promote brands to those watching live sports.

I think, even if it's just in the background while you're watching something, you are seeing it, so your brain still registers it, even if you don't think you're paying attention to the sponsorship (Group 5, 14–15, Female).

Participants also discussed the impact alcohol marketing might have on those who are exposed to it. Many described how being exposed to alcohol marketing via sports sponsorship might have an impact on younger people and how this might influence their consumption habits in the future.

I think quite a lot of kids would, like, watch football, and if they say, oh, they are advertising for, like, beer and stuff, like, they might end up, like, drinking and stuff, and it is not really good for you (Group 2, 11–13, Male).

Participants believed that sports sponsorship primed people to become familiar with certain brands from an early age and that by the time they became adults they would be more likely to purchase these brands due to their pre-existing knowledge and positive association with sport.

Drawn to the core branding

Near the end of the groups, participants were shown a slide featuring examples of advertisements for and sponsorship by alcohol free and low-alcohol (NoLo) products (Appendix C). Participants were invited to comment on these examples and discuss their reactions to the adverts. Despite the images featuring 0.0 % variants of core-branded products such as Heineken 0.0 %, Guinness 0.0 % and Corona Cero, many participants did not recognise this advertising as any different from adverts for regular strength variants of these brands. Only when they were prompted by the researcher did participants realise the advertising was for core-branded NoLo products.

R4: A lot of them say they are point zero.
Int: Did you notice that before I asked you about it?
R4: Not really (Group 1, 11–13, Female).

Once prompted, participants reflected on whether it was obvious that the adverts were for NoLo products. Views on this were mixed with some arguing that it was obvious that the adverts were for NoLo products, despite not noticing this initially, and some feeling that "it should be more obvious that they're zero per cent" (Group 4, 14–15, Male). For example, one group debated whether they had realised the adverts were for NoLo products:

Int: Do you think it was really obvious that these were all zero products?
R1: Yeah.
R5: Not 'til you pointed it out. I looked at the Guinness one on the top, bottom left and bottom right and it said zero, I was wondering what that meant when I realised (Group 6, 14–15, Male).

Those who believed it was not immediately obvious that the adverts featured NoLo products discussed the reasons for this with many mentioning that when they looked at the adverts they were drawn to the core branding rather than the zeros.

I think I've noticed whether they say low or not or have the zeros. But I don't think I've ever really, I'm not sure, I just saw the alcohol brand, I never really thought of the zeros (Group 5, 14–15, Female).

Yeah, I just read, like, the Guinness, for example, there's Guinness and then zero-point-zero. I didn't, like, think of them together (Group 4, 14–15, Male).

NoLo adverts viewed no differently to regular alcohol adverts

Most participants believed that these adverts were no different from regular strength alcohol advertising as they were still promoting the core brand. They also discussed how young people might be encouraged to try the NoLo variation which would then lead them to experiment with alcohol.

I think it's the exact same, because it's still like a beer brand. Just because it has 0 percent, it's still promoting the brand and, they do also alcohol. It's like if you were to give a kid a 0.0 percent drink, they're going to be like, oh, I'm so cool, I'm having beer. I'm going to have it with actual alcohol in it. Like I think it's the exact same (Group 9, 16–17, Female).

This analogy suggests that alcohol-free drinks may normalise or glamorise alcohol consumption, particularly for young or impressionable individuals and highlights how such products can convey the same social cues or status symbols associated with drinking alcohol. Participants highlighted a potential progression from non-alcoholic to alcoholic consumption, viewing alcohol-free products as gateway or preparatory experiences, especially for younger individuals, reinforcing that it's still functionally the same kind of marketing.

Several participants suggested that it could be more obvious the adverts are for NoLo products by "having the words or having zero percent instead of zero point zero" (Group 7, 14–15, Female). Some felt that having the '0.0 %' in a different colour from the rest of the branding meant that they didn't think it was part of the same advert which resulted in them focusing on the core branding.

Some of them say it, but I know the one on the top right it is almost part of the design. The Heineken one with the race car, no one really, I don't think, would notice the zero point zero is part of the thing because it is a different colour and everything. It looks like it is just, like, part of the board (Group 7, 14–15, Female).

Participants critiqued how the '0.0 %' label on adverts is visually downplayed, often using colour or design choices that make it less noticeable. This suggests the alcohol-free messaging is not prominent, which could mean that the branding still functions as promotion for the main (alcoholic) product. Others suggested that they should use a different name to distinguish between alcohol products and no lo products

Int: So, what do you think could be done to make it more obvious?
R2: Different branding.
Int: How do you mean by that?

R2: Like a different name or a different say, for example, Corona Extra, it could be something different than Corona Extra (Group 9, 16–17, Female).

Should NoLo advertising be permitted

Despite these reservations, most participants believed that NoLo products were healthier than regular strength alcohol products and thought it was more acceptable for NoLo products to sponsor sports than regular strength alcohol brands.

I think it's more acceptable to promote these ones at more sports games because say someone, like, enjoys the taste of it but they obviously are into sports so they don't want to be unhealthy, I think that's a good alternative (Group 8, 16–17, Male).

However, others described feeling uneasy at having alcohol brands appear during sports events, even if they were advertising the NoLo version.

The only thing is it still gives me a weird feeling that they are advertising it in sports. It just feels wrong. Even if it is not alcohol, it still feels like, most people who go to football matches can drink, but it just feels like, would be more inclined to actually not buy this one and buy the alcohol one. A fewer percentage of people would buy the no alcohol version (Group 7, 14–15, Female).

Finally, participants were asked if they thought NoLo sponsorship should be allowed. Some suggested that zero percent products should not be permitted to sponsor sporting events because it was not obvious they were not advertising alcohol.

Yes, I think treat it the same as the other one [regular strength sponsorship], but definitely don't have it in sport because if you were watching a game or something or you were wanting to watch something about it you are not going to notice if it says a zero at the end. You are just going to see the brand name (Group 7, 14–15, Female).

The results suggest that older participants (particularly those aged 16–17) were more likely to recognise and critically interpret cynical marketing tactics such as alibi branding. This perception of deliberate efforts to circumvent regulations indicates a critical evaluation of marketing intent, which typically increases with age due to cognitive development and media literacy.

Discussion

This research shows that young people as young as eleven years old exhibit a high level of brand awareness, identifying logos from a range of industries including fast food, electronics, sportswear, and notably, alcohol. This early recognition serves as evidence of young people's extensive exposure to marketing practices that may shape their perceptions and future consumption behaviours, particularly concerning alcohol. Research from Australia has found that marketing embedded in sports sponsorship, where alcohol and junk food brands dominate, contributes to unintentional brand recall among young people, many of whom remembered alcohol sponsors without prompting (Bestman et al., 2015). This highlights how marketing saturates environments traditionally considered child-friendly, blurring boundaries and embedding brand identities in young people's memories. Nairn (2010) emphasizes that young people's brand awareness tends to be strongest in categories such as food and beverages, driven largely by high marketing budgets and strategic brand placement. Notably, brand familiarity can drive preference and normalise the visibility of products, including alcohol, long before legal purchasing age is reached, as is evidenced in this study.

The capacity of young people to recognise alcohol brands at a young age underscores the pervasive nature of marketing in their environments. Within this study, sports sponsorship was cited as a major source of exposure to alcohol marketing with many participants stating that they see alcohol marketing most of the time when they watch live televised sports events. The repeated association of alcohol brands with popular sports teams, athletes, and emotionally charged events increases the salience of these brands and contributes to the normalisation of alcohol use, particularly among young people (Cody & Jackson, 2014; Graham, 2025). Participants were able to recall specific sponsorship deals between alcohol brands and various sporting organisations and teams which they have seen when watching sports such as football or rugby both in person and on television. Kelly and Ireland (2019) refer to this entrenched relationship as the "alcohol–sport nexus", in which alcohol sponsorship becomes integral to the identity and culture of sport itself. Their study revealed that even when viewers were not directly targeted, they were consistently exposed to alcohol branding through shirt sponsorship, stadium signage, and commentary references. Pettigrew and Grant (2020) argue that alcohol marketing during sports not only fosters brand familiarity but also correlates with increased intentions to drink among adolescents, especially when the content is emotionally resonant or associated with admired athletes. Participants in this study displayed a sophisticated understanding of the subtle effects of being exposed to alcohol sponsorship and how this works on a subconscious level. This aligns with work by Bestman et al. (2015) who found that even when young people did not consciously register the presence of alcohol sponsorship during sporting events, implicit memory and recall were significantly influenced.

Research has highlighted the sophistication of alcohol marketing strategies and their effectiveness in reaching even the youngest consumers (Boniface et al., 2021; Donaldson et al., 2025). A striking example of this is alibi marketing, a tactic whereby alcohol brands maintain consumer visibility through indirect signifiers such as distinctive fonts, partial logos, colour schemes, or taglines, while technically complying with advertising restrictions. This strategy appears to be particularly effective in reinforcing brand recognition among young people. This research demonstrates how young people can identify alcohol brands through minimal visual cues. Participants were able to link specific colours, shapes, and fonts with alcohol brands even when the brand name was absent, suggesting deep-seated familiarity developed through repeated exposures in sport and media environments. Participants expressed concern that alibi marketing would be used to exploit loopholes in regulations. Purves et al. (2017) observed this phenomenon during the UEFA EURO 2016 tournament. This tournament was held in France where the *Loi Evin* prohibits alcohol sports sponsorship. However, this research found frequent use of design cues such as brand slogans, colour palettes, and iconic typography, despite the brand names not being present. Murray et al. (2018) quantified the scale of this exposure across seven UEFA EURO 2016 matches and calculated that alibi impressions were visible up to 7.43 billion times with 163.3 million impressions likely to have been visible to young people. Ireland et al. (2023) argues that these tactics reflect the alcohol industry's deliberate use of psychological priming to maintain brand identity while avoiding legal liability.

The increasing presence of NoLo branding in sports sponsorship has raised concerns regarding brand confusion, particularly among younger audiences. Participants in this study struggled to identify NoLo advertising as something different from regular strength alcohol products. Although such products are often marketed as healthier alternatives or tools to encourage responsible drinking, the visual and branding continuity with their full-strength counterparts often leads to their misidentification as regular alcohol products. Qualitative research with adult drinkers has found that even adults struggle to distinguish NoLo products from standard-strength alcoholic beverages due to the use of similar fonts, logos, slogans, and colour schemes in marketing (Nicholls, 2023). These overlapping branding strategies contribute to a blurring of lines between product categories and may inadvertently reinforce rather than mitigate alcohol brand awareness among young people. Participants also pointed out that in some alcohol-free advertisements, the '0.0 %' label is so subtly or aesthetically embedded in the design that it's easy to

overlook. As a result, the ad still functions like a traditional alcohol promotion, because the distinction between alcoholic and non-alcoholic is not made visually clear or prominent. These findings echo concerns raised in previous research about the visibility and effectiveness of alcohol labelling and health messaging which found that alcohol warning labels and 'drink responsibly' messages often lack salience due to their placement, size, or colour contrast, rendering them ineffective in communicating health risks or distinguishing non-alcoholic products (Dimova & Mitchell, 2021; Edmunds et al., 2023).

Addressing the issues of alibi marketing and NoLo sponsorship is crucial because branding often mirrors that of regular alcoholic products, reinforcing brand loyalty and normalising alcohol consumption, especially among young audiences. Research suggests that exposure to alcohol-related branding regardless of product strength can increase alcohol consumption among adolescents and young adults (Nicholls, 2023). This form of marketing also weakens public health policies aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm, as it blurs the lines between alcohol promotion and responsible drinking messaging. To mitigate these effects, stricter regulations are needed to prevent alibi marketing and NoLo products from being used as loopholes in alcohol marketing bans. This includes clearer distinctions in branding, restrictions on sponsorships in sports, and ensuring that NoLo promotions do not indirectly encourage alcohol consumption.

Gender differences emerged in participants' responses, particularly in relation to brand recognition and attitudes toward alcohol sponsorship in sport. Male participants were generally more likely to recognise and recall existing alcohol sponsorship arrangements, often naming specific brands or identifying them in relation to teams or events. In contrast, female participants were more likely to adopt a critical stance, questioning the appropriateness of alcohol being associated with sport and highlighting potential risks, especially in relation to younger audiences. These differences may reflect broader gendered patterns in media consumption, sporting engagement, and the gendered nature of much alcohol marketing (Lyons et al., 2024) and suggest the need for further research exploring how gender shapes young people's responses to sponsorship and commercial messages in sport.

The Scottish context presents a unique and critical lens through which to examine young people's perceptions of alcohol marketing, particularly strategies such as alibi branding and NoLo promotion in sports sponsorship. Scotland has consistently demonstrated a strong public health commitment to addressing alcohol-related harm, most notably through pioneering measures such as Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP). This policy landscape signals to the public, including young people, that alcohol is not an everyday commodity, but a substance associated with health risks and subject to regulatory control. At the same time, alcohol remains deeply embedded in aspects of Scottish culture, including sport, social events, and national identity. The coexistence of strong public health messaging with pervasive cultural normalisation of alcohol may generate conflicting messages for young people. On one hand, they are exposed to critical narratives about alcohol-related harm and regulatory efforts to mitigate it; on the other, they encounter alcohol branding through culturally significant events, particularly sports, where such marketing appears both commonplace and endorsed. These tensions are particularly evident in ongoing policy debates, such as the Scottish Government's, 2022 consultation on restricting alcohol advertising and promotion, which explicitly identified alcohol sponsorship as a risk factor for young people's exposure (Scottish Government, 2022). The visibility of these debates in public discourse may foster greater awareness among young people of the regulatory controversies surrounding alcohol marketing. As a result, young people in Scotland may be more likely to critically interpret marketing tactics, especially those that appear covert or cynical, such as alibi branding, as deliberate attempts to circumvent regulation. This heightened critical awareness was reflected in participants' interpretations of sponsorship strategies as intentionally misleading, particularly when NoLo products mimicked the branding of full-strength alcohol. These findings underscore the importance of considering both structural (policy) and cultural (normative) influences when assessing the impact of marketing strategies on young people. Future interventions must account for these layered influences to design policies that are not only comprehensive but contextually resonant and effective in minimising alcohol-related harm among young people.

This study offers a critical lens on how the alcohol industry adapt their strategies in response to regulation and how young people are not only aware of these tactics but potentially influenced by them despite their indirect nature. The blurring between NoLo and alcoholic products, and the interpretation of alibi marketing as covert advertising, point to the need for robust policy reforms that go beyond surface-level restrictions and consider the symbolic and associative power of sponsorship and branding in sports.

Strengths and limitations

This study provides insights into young people's awareness and perceptions of alcohol sponsorship, including emerging forms such as alibi and NoLo marketing. A key strength of the research lies in its qualitative design, which enabled exploration of participants' interpretations, values, and attitudes. The use of semi-structured online focus groups allowed for flexibility in discussions while ensuring consistency across topics, enhancing both the richness and comparability of the data. Another strength is the stratified sampling framework, which ensured representation across different age groups and genders. By conducting separate groups based on age and sex, the study supported age-appropriate conversations and created a safer environment for participants to express their views, potentially increasing the validity of the findings. The use of visual prompts drawn from real-world branding scenarios also enhanced ecological validity by simulating genuine exposure contexts and eliciting more authentic responses. Despite these strengths, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the use of online focus groups may have influenced the depth or nature of engagement. Some participants may have been less forthcoming in a virtual setting, and non-verbal cues were more difficult to capture or interpret. Relatedly, technical issues such as internet connectivity or platform familiarity may have disrupted flow or affected participation quality. However, there is evidence to show that online data collection does not influence people's willingness to discuss sensitive topics (Sipes et al., 2019). Indeed, research has shown that some participants enjoy the experience of online interviews and are more comfortable speaking about personal topics using this method (Archibald et al., 2019). The recruitment of participants through a professional market research panel may have introduced selection bias, as individuals from such panels are often more media-aware or accustomed to participating in research. This could have influenced the level of brand recognition or sophistication of responses, potentially skewing findings toward greater awareness than might be found in the general population. Additionally, the sample was limited to young people residing in Scotland, which restricts the transferability of findings to other UK regions or international contexts.

This study acknowledges the potential influence of social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitive nature of discussing alcohol with young people aged 11–17 in a group setting. Participants may have shaped their responses to align with what they believed was socially acceptable or expected by peers and researchers. While the use of visual prompts (images of alcohol sponsorship) was intended to encourage open discussion and reduce personal disclosure, the presence of adult facilitators and the framing of alcohol as a risky topic may still have influenced how young people expressed their views. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

This study sheds light on young people's recognition of alibi and NoLo alcohol marketing in sports, but it leaves several important questions for future research. It does not explore the long-term behavioural effects of such marketing or whether exposure leads to increased

alcohol use over time. It highlights regulatory shortcomings but does not evaluate which specific policies are most effective at limiting young people's exposure. Emotional responses to branding, the influence of digital media, and differences across demographic groups are also underexplored. Additionally, the roles of peers, parents, and broader social environments in shaping how young people interpret these messages remain unclear. While the study links recognition of covert marketing with policy evasion, it does not address how this might affect trust in public health or regulatory institutions. Most notably, it stops short of proposing or testing concrete interventions that might mitigate the impact of indirect alcohol marketing on young audiences.

Conclusion

This research highlights the depth of alcohol brand awareness among young people, driven by consistent exposure to marketing. Sports sponsorship plays a central role, with young people frequently exposed to alcohol branding during televised and in-person sporting events. These associations with athletes and sports teams normalise alcohol use from an early age. Marketing strategies such as alibi marketing further enhance brand awareness in young people, often without conscious awareness. Studies show that even in countries with advertising restrictions, these tactics allow brands to remain highly visible, shaping attitudes and consumption behaviours over time. The growing presence of NoLo products in sports sponsorship exacerbates this issue by blurring distinctions between non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages as branding remains largely consistent with their full-strength counterparts. This branding continuity risks reinforcing alcohol brand loyalty rather than promoting responsible alternatives. To safeguard public health, especially among young people, more stringent regulations are needed, targeting indirect marketing tactics like alibi branding and restricting NoLo sponsorships in sport, to ensure that marketing does not undermine efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm.

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Data statement

The datasets generated or analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Richard I. Purves: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jack G. Martin:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Piotr Teodorowski:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Olivia Brown:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

Richard Purves and Jack Martin have previously received research funding for alcohol-related research from the Scottish Football Association (SFA) and Scottish Professional Football League (SPFL). Both organisations have commercial partnerships with unhealthy commodity industry companies, including alcohol producers. The other authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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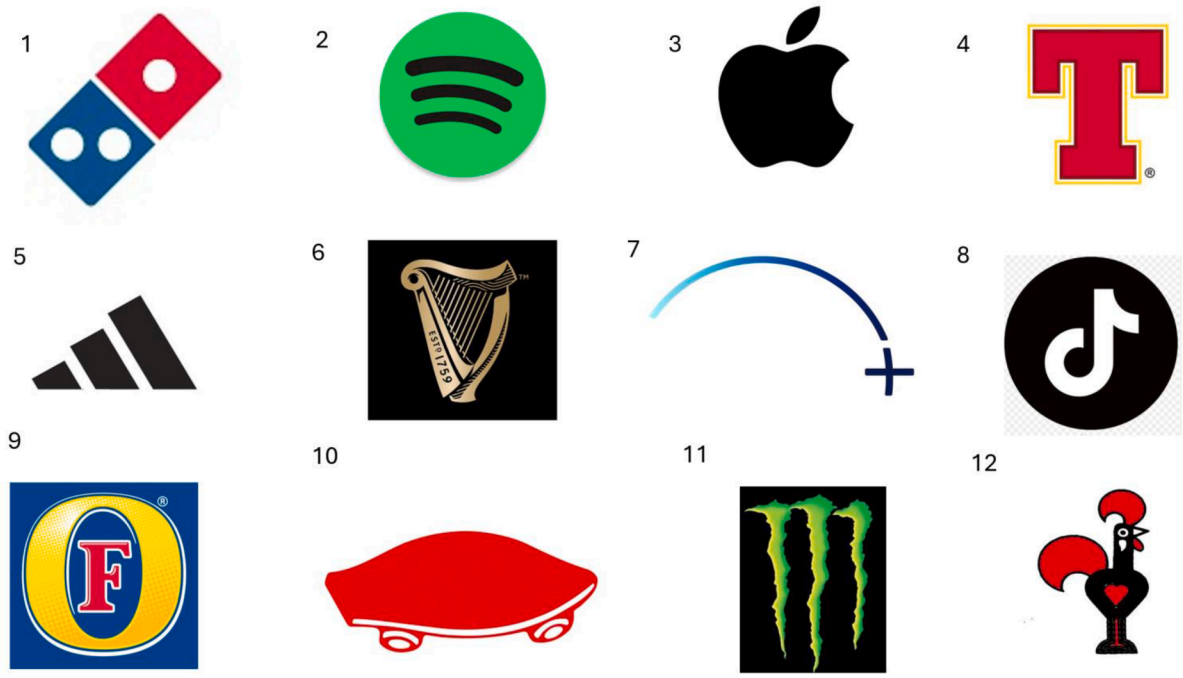
Appendix A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Appendix B

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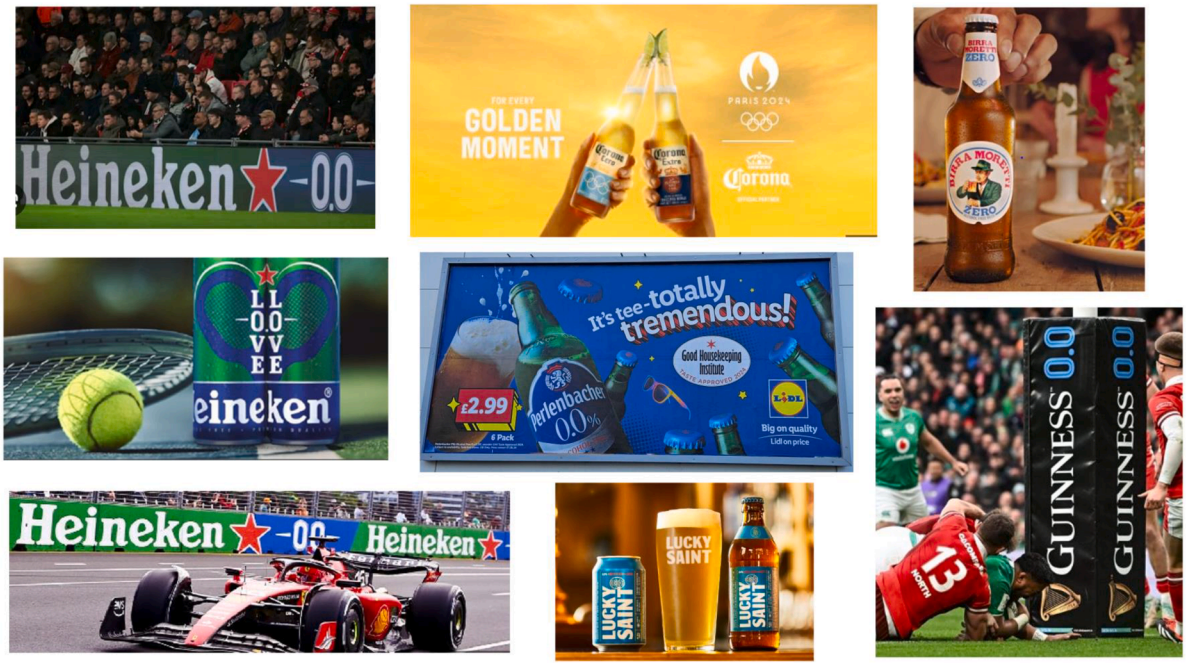
Appendix C



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