

Alibi marketing? Surrogate marketing? Brand sharing? What is the correct terminology to discuss marketing for alcohol-free and low-alcohol products which share branding with regular strength alcohol products?

We should distinguish between alibi marketing, which promotes regular-strength alcoholic drinks without mentioning the brand name, and surrogate marketing or brand-sharing through promotion of alcohol-free and low-alcohol products that use the core branding of a regular-strength product. This distinction matters for developing and enforcing clear policies to control alcohol marketing.

There is consistent evidence that exposure to, and engagement with, alcohol marketing is associated with alcohol use among young people [1]. There is also growing concern regarding the impact of alcohol marketing on adults, including those with a history of harmful alcohol use and those seeking to avoid alcohol, such as people in recovery [2, 3]. In response, the World Health Organization recommends that jurisdictions introduce statutory controls on alcohol marketing, an approach already employed in several European countries [4, 5].

Both the alcohol market and the myriad activities used to promote alcohol are constantly evolving, presenting new challenges for designing and enforcing marketing controls. A key development in the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, has been growth in the availability and consumption of alcohol-free (also referred to as zero-alcohol) and low-alcohol drinks [6–8]—typically defined in the United Kingdom as drinks containing less than 1.2% alcohol-by-volume. Many leading alcohol producers now have alcohol-free and low-alcohol variants that share similar branding to their regular-strength counterparts. These are hereafter referred to as ‘core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products’.

It has been suggested that promotion of these core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products may act as a form of ‘alibi marketing’ for both the regular strength products and the overall brand [6, 9–13]. Alibi marketing conventionally involves using the key components of an alcohol brand's identity in marketing communications (e.g. colours, fonts and slogans), but without explicitly mentioning the core brand name [14–16]. This differs from standard marketing communications, where the core brand name would typically be a key feature. The practice of alibi marketing has roots in how tobacco companies sought to circumvent statutory restrictions on marketing [14].

It has since also been observed as a technique to circumvent France's Évin law on alcohol marketing [17], such as Carlsberg's ‘Probably... the best in the world’ marketing during the UEFA EURO 2016 football tournament [15] and Guinness's ‘Greatness’ branding during the rugby union Six Nations Championship [16].

We argue, however, that there are two important distinctions between alibi marketing, as it is typically defined, and what has been observed to date in marketing for core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products. First, as described above, a defining characteristic of alibi marketing is the absence of the core brand name [14–16]. In marketing for core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products, however, the brand name associated with the established regular-strength product is typically still a key component of the marketing output, albeit alongside an indication that it is an alcohol-free or low-alcohol variant. Second, the primary motive of alibi marketing remains promotion of regular strength products, as no other brand variants are explicitly mentioned. Conversely, marketing for core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products promotes the variant that is explicitly mentioned, even if it may also indirectly promote the regular strength product.

We believe it is important for researchers and policymakers to recognize that although there are similarities between alibi marketing and marketing for core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products—both are subclasses of alcohol marketing and contribute to awareness and salience of the core brand—they should not be conflated or treated as though they are the same thing. Instead, we suggest that it is more appropriate to label marketing for core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products as ‘surrogate marketing’ or ‘brand sharing’, the latter of which is intended to include conceptually similar terms such as ‘brand stretching’ or ‘brand extending’. We offer both as more appropriate terminology than alibi marketing, but suggest that their correct usage is contingent upon the wider regulatory context for alcohol marketing in each jurisdiction. Surrogate marketing may be more appropriate where the promotion of core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products is seemingly driven by statutory restrictions on alcohol marketing. In this case, the marketing could act as a direct substitute for marketing of the regular-strength (‘parent’) brands. Conversely, brand sharing, stretching or extending may be

more appropriate where the promotion of core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products is not driven by statutory restrictions, as it can co-exist in the marketing landscape alongside promotion of the regular-strength variants.

Understanding and accounting for the distinction between alibi marketing versus surrogate marketing or brand sharing has important policy implications. Norway and Ireland provide an interesting contrast of how varied approaches can result in tangible differences in the marketing to which consumers are exposed. In Norway, the comprehensive alcohol advertising ban covers any form of mass communication which has the purpose of marketing alcohol, and the restrictions also extend to any non-alcoholic offerings which use the same branding as an alcohol product, thereby seemingly prohibiting both alibi and surrogate marketing [4, 5]. Conversely, Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 seemingly only restricts alcohol brand iconography in circumstances where it 'may reasonably be regarded as a recommendation of the [alcohol] product to the public' [18]. While Ireland's legislation therefore appears to cover alibi marketing, as promoting the regular-strength variant remains the focus of the marketing communication, it remains unclear whether it extends to the kinds of surrogate marketing through core-branded alcohol-free products that have been observed in restricted spaces since parts of the legislation commenced [9, 19, 20].

While alcohol marketing policy must be clear on how these varied subclasses of marketing are to be handled in monitoring and enforcement, decisions regarding the appropriate and proportionate response to marketing for core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products must be informed by robust evidence about the impact it has. Surrogate marketing and brand sharing facilitates exposure to the core brand identity and, therefore, empirical research is needed to examine the extent to which it influences consumption of alcohol-free and low-alcohol variants versus regular-strength variants. It is also important to examine whether the impact of surrogate marketing and brand sharing varies across the population, including among important subgroups such as young people or adults seeking to avoid or reduce alcohol use [3]. This is not an exhaustive list of the research needed to inform evidence-based policy for surrogate marketing and brand sharing, but simply an indicator of the current lacunae in knowledge.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are alcohol-free and low-alcohol products that do not share any brand similarities with a regular-strength counterpart, yet they still use alcohol connotations in their branding (e.g. terms such as 'beer' or 'lager'). These should be defined as non-core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products, and promotion of these is neither surrogate marketing, brand sharing or alibi marketing. Policymakers must be clear about whether and how policies for alcohol marketing apply to non-core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products, and if not, how they are instead covered by other marketing policies. Before restricting surrogate marketing and/or brand-sharing, policymakers should also consider whether the existence and marketing of non-core-branded alcohol-free and low-alcohol products alone would generate enough substitution between regular-strength alcohol and alcohol-free and low-alcohol products to deliver public health benefits. Alternatively, it is

necessary to consider whether marketing of core-branded products with which the public are familiar is more effective at driving substitution, even if it also promotes the core brand. The balance between these two considerations will dictate much of the net impact upon public health.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Nathan Critchlow: Conceptualization (equal); writing—original draft (lead); writing—review and editing (equal). **John Holmes:** Conceptualization (equal); funding acquisition (lead); writing—original draft (supporting); writing—review and editing (equal). **Niamh Fitzgerald:** Conceptualization (equal); funding acquisition (supporting); writing—original draft (supporting); writing—review and editing (equal).

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DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

N.C. was on the board of directors at Alcohol Focus Scotland between 2017 and 2022. Since 2020, N.C. has also been part of Alcohol Focus Scotland's expert network on alcohol marketing. N.F. is on the advisory group for the Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Alliance Scotland. N.F. was a member of the Public Health Alcohol Research Group (PHARG) appointed by the Minister for Health in Ireland to advise on monitoring and evaluating the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. The University of Stirling has received funding for consultancy work undertaken by N.F. and N.C. for PHARG. The University of Stirling has also received funding from the Institute of Public Health to support N.C.'s fellowship research into the marketing restrictions implemented under Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. N.F. and J.H. are members of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities Alcohol Advisory Group.

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