

“IT WORKS LIKE A GATEWAY DRUG... THEY START ON THE ZERO ALCOHOL AND THEY WANT TO TRY THE REAL THING”: PERCEPTIONS OF ZERO-ALCOHOL BEVERAGES AND THEIR USE BY ADOLESCENTS

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Introduction / Issues: Zero-alcohol beverages appear and taste similar to alcoholic beverages, and are increasingly available in Australia. Researchers have raised concern that they may increase exposure to alcohol branding and encourage earlier interest in alcohol among young people. However, individuals may also replace their consumption of alcohol products with zero-alcohol beverages, and therefore reduce alcohol-related harms. Parents are central to shaping alcohol-related attitudes and access for adolescents, but their attitudes towards supply of zero alcohol beverages to adolescents has not been previously studied.

Method / Approach: We conducted semi-structured individual video interviews and reflexive thematic analysis to investigate parents' ($n=38$) perceptions of zero-alcohol beverage supply and their use by adolescents.

Key Findings: Parents considered that zero alcohol products could be useful alternatives for adults to reduce drinking, but held concerns around their use by adolescents, including whether they had adverse health effects or promoted alcohol brands to minors (Theme 1: “Adolescent consumption is unnecessary”). Some parents supported moderated supply in ‘appropriate’ contexts, particularly if drinking alcohol was considered inevitable (2: “Benefits of use in social settings”). Some parents shared concerns that supply of zero-alcohol products could normalise alcohol consumption and lead to initiation of alcohol use (3: “Developing adult drinking identity”).

Discussion and Conclusions: As zero-alcohol beverages are becoming increasingly widespread, efforts are needed to clarify perceived harms and support parents when considering supply. Existing parent-targeted messages overseas that highlight potential normalisation for young people could be considered, in addition to brand-level alcohol advertising restrictions extending to zero-alcohol beverages.