

An Examination of Public Concerns Relating to Combined Text and Graphic Alcohol Warning Labels: An all-Ireland Cross-Sectional Study

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SUMMARY

Alcohol remains a serious threat to the health and wellbeing of people across the island of Ireland. Ireland introduced legislation to introduce mandatory alcohol warning labels (AWLs) in 2026, although implementation is deferred until 2028. The cross-sectional survey research sought to explore support for AWLs across the island. The remainder of the survey then explored concerns people had with more graphic AWLs, as well as exploring what additional warnings or information people would like to see displayed in AWLs. Responses were gathered from 475 staff members and students at two universities, one located in Ireland and the other in Northern Ireland. A high level of support for the proposed Irish AWLs was noted (77.9%), with support for more graphic cigarette-style AWLs lower at 60.2%. The potential development of graphic AWLs evoked a considerable range of concerns thematically arranged as 1) Children; 2) Desensitisation; 3) Risks Over-played; 4) No Impact; 5) Unpleasant Viewing; 6) Addiction; 7) Trauma Trigger; 8) Stigmatisation; 9) Diverse Warnings. Although overall there is support for AWLs amongst the convenience sample, there remains confusion about the need and intent of AWLs. Further research is therefore recommended.

Keywords: Alcohol; Alcohol Control; Alcohol Warning Labels; Health Promotion; Public Health; Ireland

INTRODUCTION

Alcohol consumption is a commercial determinant of health (CDoH) that has a significant negative impact on individuals, families, communities, and the environment [1-4]. The impact of alcohol on global mortality and morbidity is significant. In terms of mortality, alcohol consumption is responsible for more than 3 million deaths per annum globally. Looking at morbidity, in excess of 5% of the total global burden of disease and injury is attributable to alcohol [5-6]. In their recent analysis for the European Commission, Chua et al. identified 16 diseases directly attributable to alcohol [7]. However, the wider negative impacts

of alcohol on the self, partners, families, children and communities must also be acknowledged [8-13]. Ireland and Northern Ireland are no exception, and the negative impacts of alcohol and the need for alcohol controls are very evident in both jurisdictions [14-18].

Considering the threat posed by alcohol the Irish Government passed the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, 2018 [19], in recognition of the central role of policy in protecting the health of nations [20]. Although this Act, and related legislation, has come under criticism for its slow roll-out, identified deficits, and poor enforcement [21-29], it still represents an important achievement for alcohol control in Ireland, and many of the general public endorse the principles of the Act [30-31]. The

Public Health (Alcohol) Act included a wide suite of measures [19], some of the most notable being the introduction of minimum unit pricing [32], and strict restrictions on advertising. Although Ireland faced intense legal opposition from regional and global forums [33], the Act also mandated that starting in May 2026 a prescribed alcohol warning label (AWL) would be required on all containers of alcohol sold in Ireland [34]. The introduction of the AWLs has been postponed by the Irish Government until 2028 [35].

As is evident in Figure 1, this alcohol warning label includes a focus on the dangers of developing both liver disease and cancer associated with alcohol consumption (Figure 1). The AWL also includes a pictogram warning pregnant women not to drink, as well as nutritional information, and a website address for additional information supplied by a governmental body in Ireland [36].



Figure 1. Ireland's Proposed Alcohol Warning Label [36]

Although the causal link between alcohol consumption and liver disease is well known [37-38], the inclusion of a cancer health warning on alcoholic beverages as part of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan has focused significant attention on the issue of AWLs over the last 5 years [39]. The U.S. Surgeon General's 2025 Advisory on Alcohol and Cancer Risk has contributed to a consensus on this issue, at least among the Public Health community [40]. The US has had a mandatory text warning on distilled spirits labels since 1988 [41]. However, as Figure 2 shows, this refers mainly to pregnancy, cognitive performance, and general health risk. Unlike the US warning (Figure 2), the mandated Irish alcohol warning label does not feature signal words such as 'warning' or 'danger' (see Figure 1). However, the 2025 European Commission study on effective alcohol warning labels specifically notes the importance of the use of these words [7].

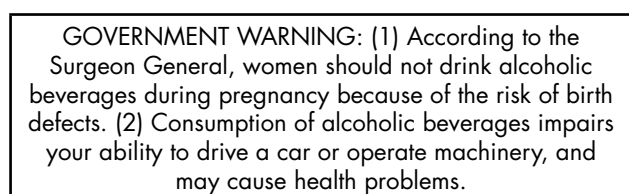


Figure 2. The health warning statement required on distilled spirit labels under the Alcoholic Beverage Labelling Act (ABLA) of 1988 [41]

A recent European Commission report has noted the lack of awareness of the health risks of alcohol consumption [42]. This report also rejected self-regulation and co-regulation with industry and supported the use of alcohol warning labels [42]. Although there are some contrary findings [43-46], there is increasing evidence to support the use of alcohol health warning labels [47-53]. The findings of the European Commission's ALHaMBRA Project investigating alcohol warning messaging suggest a combination of images and text should be used in AWLs and should focus on cancer and the harm to the unborn [52]. This report also highlighted the importance of a prescribed size, position, border and colouring of such warnings. Although Ireland's proposed warning includes a pictogram warning against drinking alcohol while pregnant, it does not feature similar images for the cancer and liver disease messaging, which may reduce their impact [54].

Further research on AWLs has been called for [55]. In an investigation of AWLs in France, Dossou et al. noted that respondents found the warnings to be vague, lacking credibility, and ineffective [56]. Graphic warnings can also result in greater reactance and therefore resistance to such warnings [57 58 59]. May et al. have noted that the 'alcohol causes cancer' message may be a difficult message to accept amongst some populations [59]; people's individual perception of risk around alcohol is an important part of the message getting through [60]. Care is also needed to avoid health warnings contributing to stigma. This is particularly relevant to warning labels that use pictorial images of women who are pregnant and who may feel stigma or shame when viewing these images. However, Wolfson and Poole emphasise that a supportive alcohol policy must be at the centre of raising awareness of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, at individual and societal levels [61]. Examples of supportive alcohol policies include alcohol warning labels, routine screening and brief interventions.

In summary, alcohol warning labels, can differ in message and delivery. Evidence is emerging about which elements of the nature of alcohol warning labels might reach populations we hope will benefit. This study aimed to investigate the level of support for AWLs among an all-Ireland sample, as well as to explore the types of information people wanted to see on AWLs. This study also sought to understand any concerns respondents might have about AWLs.

METHOD

Data was collected via a cross-sectional convenience sample of students and staff at two universities on the island of Ireland. One university is a traditional red-brick high status university, the other is newer and more vocationally oriented technological university that caters to a more diverse student population within

a more regionally focused context [62]. Potential respondents were invited to participate in an online (MS Forms) survey. Data were downloaded via Excel and examined in SPSS (closed questions) or NVivo (open-ended questions). The survey consisted of three elements: demographic questions, closed questions, and open-ended questions. The closed questions included two questions asking about AWLs, alongside an image of both the proposed Irish AWL (see Figure 1) and a current combined text and graphic lung cancer warning, as required under EU regulations [63]. Two open-ended questions followed this section. The two questions asked were 'Are there any concerns you would have about alcohol warning labels that contained graphic images?' and 'Is there any other information you would like to see/ would not like to see on alcohol warning labels?'

Following recommendations concerning data immersion, all open-ended data were read three times prior to analysis [64]. Open-ended questions were examined using reflexive thematic analysis [65-66]. All data were analysed independently by FH and JMS and agreed upon. The first author is a heterosexual married man and father in his mid-50s, with a background in public health geography. His research experience and interests include tobacco, gambling and alcohol control. He is a non-drinker. The second author is a heterosexual married woman and mother in her mid-50s. Her professional background is as a social worker and thanatologist. She has professional experience working with homeless populations who have substance use problems, and is a minimal social drinker. Reflective logs were kept, facilitating the reflexivity required in the research process [67-68]. All authors reviewed and refined the final themes.

RESULTS

Responses were collected from 475 participants. Males constituted 27.4% (130) of the sample and females 70.5% (335). Ten respondents (2.1%) described themselves as Non-binary/Gender fluid. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 73, with a mean age of 37.0 (SD = 14.3 years). As shown in Table 1, the results demonstrate a high degree of support for the proposed Irish AWLs. 77.9% (370) of respondents strongly supported or tended to support their introduction, with only 9.9% (47) opposing. Support for graphic cigarette-style AWLs was somewhat lower at 60.2% (291), with 26.3% (125) opposing.

Level of support & opposition	Support for the proposed Irish AWL	Support for Graphic 'Cigarette Style' AWLs
Strongly support	48.4% (230)	38.5% (183)
Tend to support	29.5% (140)	22.7% (108)
Neither support nor oppose	12.2% (58)	12.4% (59)
Tend to oppose	6.5% (31)	16.0% (76)
Strongly oppose	3.4% (16)	10.3% (49)

Table 1. Levels of Support & Disagreement for the Introduction of Alcohol Warning Labels

Using reflective thematic analysis, a total of nine themes were identified. These were Children; Desensitisation; Risks Over-played; No Impact; Unpleasant Viewing; Addiction; Trauma Trigger; Stigmatisation; Diverse Warnings. Blaming women was identified as a sub-theme of Stigmatisation.

A notable theme identified was 'Children'. This theme encapsulated a concern of how warning images might adversely affect them. This can be seen in the following extracts where some spoke of concerns for their own children, and some children in general:

"That they would be visible to children in shops which could be traumatic for them."

"If a child saw them, depending on how graphic it would traumatise the child"

"Whilst cigarette packets are hidden in shops, if alcohol had the same labels it would need to be hidden also. I do not like the idea of my children seeing such graphic images."

"Perhaps just making sure they are not too graphic to scare children but at the same time it would be good to warn children of alcohol's effects."

As can be seen from these responses, some respondents felt that graphic AWLs could potentially traumatise a child. Concern of the exposure of young people to inappropriate content is not new, dating back decades [69]; however, in more recent times, online exposure has been a concern. However, physical images remain a concern [70].

The second theme identified was Desensitisation. This theme related to the perceived erosion of the impact of graphic AWLs over time, where they would cease to have an effect. Evidence of this theme can be seen in the following quotations:

"People would be desensitised to the images over time."

"I'll become desensitised to it just like I did with cigarettes."

"People become immune to graphic images."

Desensitisation to warning labels has been noted in the cognate field of tobacco control research [71-73]. However, combined text and graphic tobacco warning labels remain a powerful tool in tobacco control [74-75].

The third theme identified was termed Risks

Overplayed. As some drinkers did not consider the risks applied to them, they appeared to reject the 'need' for alcohol warning labels. For some, they considered tobacco to be more dangerous than alcohol, and that the risks were not comparable. This can be seen in the following extracts:

"I think the risks are overplayed and graphic images will not assist."

"It tends to demonise alcohol but moderate/low levels of alcohol are safe and ok."

"I don't think tobacco/nicotine consumption and moderate alcohol consumption carry the same risks. To me, it makes sense to have those images on cigarette packets, as smoking even occasionally can be harmful, but I think having graphic images on alcohol would be excessive [I am open to correction!]"

It is interesting to note that this denial of the need for action is similar to one of the standard strategies of the alcohol industry to avoid government regulation. As part of this suite of strategies, they routinely deny that action is required, divert attention away from the issue, and delay any form of regulation [76-78].

The fourth theme identified was the concept of No Impact, which was identified in the responses. This theme was based on the idea that AWLs are essentially redundant as they will have no impact on consumer drinking habits. This can be seen in the following quotes:

"I don't think having warnings or images on alcohol is going to make a massive difference in the overall purchasing or intent on consuming alcohol"

"I don't think warning labels will deter people from becoming addicted."

"They will most likely be ignored."

"It tends to not deter anyone from smoking, so chances are it wouldn't deter people from drinking either. It's simply unpleasant to look at."

All of these responses perceive that AWLs may have minimal impact. AWLs do have an evidence base, working alongside a suite of alcohol control initiatives [47-52], but it might be argued that individuals surveyed here are unaware of or unconvinced of the evidence.

Another theme to emerge was that of 'Unpleasant viewing'. Respondents reported that they found warning imagery to be unpleasant. This theme can be seen in the extracts below:

"For someone trying to enjoy themselves or celebrate occasionally, seeing graphic images like those on cigarette packaging is not very pleasant."

"For me personally, I don't want to see these images."

"It's just off putting."

This finding is notable as the proposed Irish AWL does not feature any of the stark imagery used for some other addictive products. Presumably, this response relates to some of the EU-mandated tobacco warning labels which can be quite graphic [63]. Such warnings do routinely include images designed to evoke fear and disgust to deter smokers and would-be smokers [79-81]. The concern that it is "off putting" perhaps

speaks to concerns of whether their enjoyment may be influenced by AWLs in contrary to pleasure in alcohol consumption [82].

The sixth theme identified was that of Alcohol Dependence. Some respondents felt that the current warnings do not adequately convey the risk of alcohol dependence, or the addictive potential of alcohol. This can be seen in the following quotations:

"I would like acknowledgements that drinking alcohol can lead to dependency on it or addiction in some situations."

"alcoholism warning signs"

"The risk of addiction"

"More information on the definition of alcoholism/addiction and dependence particularly in Ireland. I believe that many people have no idea that the quantity of alcohol they consume per week could be categorised as dependent."

The addictive nature of alcohol is well-known and widely acknowledged [83-85]. In contrary to other perceived risks (e.g. risk of cancer or liver problems), this appears to be an important risk to the public, and one that is missing. This could be, because as the first one indicates, they only see the risk applying in some circumstances [60].

Another important theme identified within the data was termed Trauma Trigger. This theme was concerned that graphic images could potentially serve as a trigger to some people that would link to past negative experiences. This can be seen in the following quotations:

"If in a bar/restaurant and all individual bottles have graphic images they may be triggers from previous trauma for people."

"Could be a trigger for people's mental health depending on their own personal experiences."

"Graphic images relating to pregnancy or development of the child could upset or trigger people who are experiencing child loss or have FAS themselves."

"Depending on the topic, it might be triggering to people to see these pictures and cause them to drink more, or it could become a deterrent"

There has been a significant increase in the focus on trauma in recent years [86-89]. There are calls to explore the interplay between trauma and alcohol [90], however, it is unclear how these warning labels might contribute (or not) to short- or long-term trauma for individuals at risk.

The eighth theme identified related to Stigma. Some respondents felt that the warnings could further stigmatise people who are alcohol dependent or who are experiencing alcohol problems. This can be seen in the quotations below:

"Could potentially lead to stigmatising people who are alcohol dependent further."

"One concern I would have is a lack of sensitivity towards those who suffer/have suffered from similar issues to those graphically displayed on packaging, particularly in consideration of the high prevalence

and visibility of alcohol products across Irish society. A fear-led approach to harm reduction could also lead to unfair judgment against individuals with addiction or other ill-health”

“The potential for increasing stigma towards problematic alcohol users”

Stigma is a powerful force within society [91], and most people strive to present themselves favourably to those around them most of the time [92]. Excess alcohol use can be both highly celebrated, but also highly stigmatised [93-98].

A sub-theme relating to stigma identified through this research was that of blaming women. Several participants felt that AWLs could become yet another tool to criticise women. This feeling was evident in the following quotes:

“Leave out the pregnancy warnings, there’s enough judgment and far too much advice given to pregnant women, the last thing they need is to be judged if they’re having a small glass of wine now and again. I would strongly object to singling out pregnant people.”

“I would be concerned that issues relating to women are not construed as shaming.”

“In terms of alcohol and pregnancy and FASD risk, I think this information is vital and necessary but am concerned that some people think women are being blamed.”

“That women will be vilified more in relation to pregnancy and alcohol consumption.”

The strength of feeling related to this theme is very evident in the use of terms such as ‘judged’, ‘shaming’, ‘blamed’, and ‘vilified’. Respondents raised concerns over the warnings leading to increased blame and stigma targeted at pregnant women who do consume alcohol [99-100].

The final theme identified in this research was the breadth of information that people thought should be included in alcohol warning labels. This theme was termed Diverse Warnings. These included, for example, a range of what might be termed environmental concerns. Some respondents expressed a desire for information on: water quality in the region of origin, pesticides and organic status, soil heavy metals, and the carbon footprint. Example quotes include:

“info about pesticides or organic status of grains/fruit used to make alcohol water quality in region used to make alcohol info on whether heavy metals tested and results”

“Environmental... e.g. how much carbon is used to produce and distribute”

Other respondents sought a significant expansion of the financial information available on the warning to include issues such as Eurozone price comparisons, the allocation of the minimum unit price requirement increase to retailers, VAT and excise information, and information on the manufacturer’s ownership. Exemplars of such quotes include:

“I would like to see a Eurozone comparison of the price of a particular drink in comparison to its Irish price in order to allow drinkers to see how much

they are being additionally charged for it. Also, for consumer transparency, any alcohol sold under minimum unit pricing needs to expressly state how none of the additional money collected goes to the exchequer and that it only goes to the retailers.”

“Vat and excise portion of cost”

Several respondents requested that the alcohol warnings covered a wider range of health issues associated with alcohol, including: the number of deaths from alcohol; alcohol-related brain injury; FASD; alcohol-related suicide; breast cancer; the dangers of young people drinking alcohol; the dangers of the elderly drinking alcohol; vomiting; drink-driving; and risk-taking, including unprotected sex. Examples of such statements include the following:

“Effects on mental health also number of young people that have alcohol related deaths”

“Need to see: Impact of alcohol on brain health across lifespan - FASD, Teenage Brain, Wernickes Korsakoffs and Dementia.”

“Risky behaviour including Sex without protection.”

Some respondents also voiced a desire to see warnings that addressed such issues as alcohol’s link with violence, public order, rape, domestic violence, child neglect, and social, emotional and financial impacts.

“The link between domestic violence & child neglect and alcohol”

“Perhaps a greater emphasis on the social, emotional and financial impact of alcohol abuse/misuse”

“rape and death driving rates under the influence of alcohol”

Several respondents voiced support for information on allergens, calorific content, caffeine content, and the danger of combining alcohol and cocaine. This can be seen in the following quotes:

“I strongly think the issue of the combined effects of Alcohol & Cocaine use SHOULD be highlighted as part of any campaign.”

“Would like to see allergens and alcohol by volume.”

Finally, other respondents suggested that the warnings should feature well-known celebrities discussing the dangers of drinking. Others argued that alcohol warning labels should also be in braille. Evidence for this can be seen in the following statements:

“I would like to see images and text in braille”

“About 10 years ago there was a campaign against smoking featuring the actor Yul Brynner, warning against the dangers of smoking. It was only released after he died of lung cancer. Perhaps warnings from public figures about how there is basically nothing beneficial to your health about the use of alcohol, and there is no safe amount to take in pregnancy etc. would be effective.”

As can be seen from the extracts above the Diverse Warnings theme clearly demonstrates the wide breadth of information that respondents would like to see featured on AWLs.

DISCUSSION

This all-Ireland mixed methods study identified considerable support for the proposed Irish AWLs at 77.9%. High levels of support for such warning labels have been noted elsewhere [101]. Support for graphic cigarette-style AWLs was lower at 60.2%. The potential development of AWLs evoked a considerable range of concerns. These concerns focused on nine themes, including a simple distaste for such images (Unpleasant Viewing), as well as concerns over their potential adverse impact on young people (Children). It was also felt that such images could harm those with prior alcohol related trauma (Trauma Trigger), and those using alcohol or alcohol dependent (Stigmatisation; Blaming Women). Respondents also denied the utility of AWLs, stating that they were unnecessary (Risks Over-Played), would have minimal impact (No Impact), or would only have short-term effects (Desensitisation). The final themes identified are related. Respondents argued in favour of an extensive range of warnings and information on AWLs (Diverse Warnings), and felt a key risk, addiction was missed. This concern about policy change and what it might mean amongst the public is an important consideration in effectiveness [102,30].

AWLs are relatively new, certainly as a legal requirement within Ireland or the rest of Europe. The AWLs introduced voluntarily to date have tended to be small, inoffensive, and rather bland. Any significant change is likely to invoke concerns, as it was when graphic warning images were first introduced on tobacco packaging to help combat the scourge of smoking. However, the damage wrought by alcohol is such that decisive action is required [1,5-6]. AWLs have significant potential as a means of alcohol control [42-55,103], and as such should be mandated both within the EU and globally as soon as possible. Alcohol consumption must also become denormalised. Therefore, ethically sensitive further research needs to be conducted with specific groups to identify how to address potential concerns they may have regarding graphic AWLs. Such groups should include children, pregnant women, and those with past or current alcohol addiction issues.

FUNDING

This research was supported by Ireland's Higher Education Authority under its North-South funding scheme.

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