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# The Sociocultural Meaning of Zero-Calorie Beverage Consumption: A Qualitative Study on Health Perceptions and Beverage Choices Among Young Adults in South Korea\*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the sociocultural aspects of zero-calorie beverage consumption among young Koreans. Through an interview methodology, this study explores the perceptions of zero-calorie beverages, consumption behavior, and the important role of zero-calorie beverages in identity formation. The study uniquely integrates theories from health psychology, sociology, and cultural studies to analyze the complex interplay between individual health beliefs, social norms, and evolving cultural trends. The results show that the choice of zero-calorie beverages is heavily influenced by health consciousness, pervasive appearance culture, social media dynamics, and shifting workplace paradigms. Participants had a nuanced view of these drinks as both a “healthy alternative” and an “artificial product,” reflecting the deep ambivalence that characterizes modern consumer society. Importantly, we found that the consumption of zero-calorie beverages serves as a means of sophisticated self-expression and impression management, acting as a form of cultural capital. This study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of health behavior in specific sociocultural contexts and provides important insights for health policy makers, marketing strategists. The study emphasizes that a multidisciplinary approach is essential in studying contemporary food and beverage consumption patterns, which have far-reaching implications for public health efforts and social epidemiology at home and abroad.

**Keywords:** Zero-calorie beverages, Sociocultural consumption, Health perceptions, Identity formation, Korean young adults

**Major Classification:** I12, Z13, M31

## 1. Introduction

The 21st century has seen a surge in global interest in health. In particular, the rise of lifestyle diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease has highlighted the importance of improving dietary habits (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). In this context, the zero

beverage market is growing rapidly in response to consumer demand to reduce calorie intake while maintaining the flavor of traditional beverages (Euromonitor International, 2023). Zero beverages generally refer to beverages with no or very low calories, and are characterized by the use of artificial sweeteners to sweeten them (Sylvetsky & Rother, 2018). According to global market research firm Mordor

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Intelligence (2023), the global zero beverage market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.2% from 2023 to 2028. In South Korea, in particular, the market for zero beverages is growing even faster due to the spread of the “wellness” trend coupled with a high concern for health (Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation [aT], 2022).

However, the popularity of zero-calorie beverages has been accompanied by ongoing health controversies. Some studies suggest that long-term consumption of artificial sweeteners can lead to adverse effects such as metabolic abnormalities, weight gain, and disruption of the gut microbiome (Pearlman et al., 2017; Suez et al., 2014). On the other hand, other studies suggest that when consumed appropriately, it can help with calorie reduction and weight management (Rogers et al., 2016). These conflicting findings add to consumer confusion and have a complex impact on the perception and choice of zero-calorie beverages. On the one hand, food and beverage choices are not simply determined by individual tastes or health beliefs, but are heavily influenced by socio-cultural context (Furst et al., 1996). According to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of “distinction-making,” food choices can be a means of expressing an individual's social identity and class. From this perspective, the choice and consumption of zero beverages can be seen as a complex behavior that goes beyond simple beverage selection and reflects an individual's health consciousness, lifestyle, and social status in modern society.

In particular, young adults in Korea are digital natives and are sensitive to information sharing and trend formation through social media (Kim & Choi, 2019). Their food and beverage choices are the result of a combination of factors, including not only individual health beliefs, but also peer group influence, idealized body images formed through media, and the appearance-oriented culture of modern Korean society (Lee et al., 2020). Therefore, in order to understand the phenomenon of zero beverage consumption in depth, it is necessary to go beyond a nutritional and physiological perspective and analyze it in a sociocultural context. In particular, by exploring consumers' experiences and perceptions through qualitative research methods, it is possible to understand the complex meaning systems and social dynamics inherent in the zero beverage selection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Against this backdrop, this study aims to qualitatively explore the experiences of zero beverage consumption among young adults in Korea.

Through a comprehensive understanding of health perceptions, beverage choice criteria, and related socio-cultural contexts, this study aims to shed light on the meaning of zero beverage consumption in contemporary Korean society. Such research is expected to provide useful insights for health policy formulation, marketing strategy

development in the food and beverage industry, and consumer education program design.

The main objective of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the zero beverage consumption experiences of young adults in Korea in a sociocultural context. The research aims to examine young adults' perceptions and consumption behaviors of zero beverages, the sociocultural factors that influence their choice process, the impact on identity formation and expression, and the health discourse and consumption culture in contemporary Korean society. To this end, the research questions were set by applying Geertz's deep description, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Foucault's technology of the self, Goffman's impression management theory, and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. A qualitative research methodology will be adopted to collect data through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis method. The study is expected to provide useful information for health policy makers, food and beverage industry officials, and developers of consumer education programs, and contribute to the academic development of the fields of consumer culture studies and health sociology.

## 2. Theoretical background

Zero beverages are beverages with no or very low calories, often sweetened using artificial or natural zero-calorie sweeteners. The zero beverage market is growing rapidly around the world, especially in Korea. This is driven by a variety of factors, including increasing health concerns, the need to prevent lifestyle diseases, and the government's introduction of a sugar tax. Key trends include health-conscious consumption, product diversification, preference for natural sweeteners, and functional enhancements, which are contributing to the market growth due to the preferences of Millennials and Generation Z. In the future, the market is expected to continue to expand through product diversification and functionalization. The relationship between health perceptions and consumption behavior provides an important theoretical basis for understanding the phenomenon of zero beverage consumption. According to Rosenstock's (1974) health belief model, an individual's health-related behavior is determined by perceived vulnerability, severity, and benefits. Applying this to zero beverage consumption, the higher the perceived vulnerability to obesity or diabetes, the higher the perceived severity of these diseases, and the greater the perceived benefits of consuming zero beverages, the more likely a person is to choose zero beverages. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior explains that behavioral intentions are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. In the context of zero beverage

consumption, positive attitudes toward health, perceptions of others' consumption of zero beverages, and the perception that zero beverages are easy to purchase and consume may influence zero beverage consumption intentions and behavior.

Zeithaml's (1988) perceived value theory argues that consumers' product choices are driven by perceived value. In the case of zero beverages, the functional value of calorie reduction, the emotional value of satisfaction of making a healthy choice, and the social value of building a health-oriented image may influence consumption behavior. The concept of health literacy, proposed by Nutbeam (2000), refers to an individual's ability to understand and utilize health information. In the context of zero beverages, consumers with higher levels of health literacy are more likely to understand the nutrition facts label of a product, weigh the pros and cons of artificial sweeteners, and make informed choices. In the context of young adults in South Korea, these theories, combined with health information sharing on social media, the "small but certain happiness" trend, and a culture that values appearance, may contribute to unique aspects of zero beverage consumption behavior.

As Kim and Choi (2019) point out in their study, social media plays an important role in the spread of health-related information, for example, sharing healthy lifestyles on Instagram may act as a subjective norm, or choosing zero beverages as a "small but certain happiness" related to dieting.

Food and beverage choices are influenced by a variety of sociocultural factors beyond individual preferences. According to Bourdieu's (1984) 'distinction-making' theory, food choices can be a means of expressing social identity and class. Korean young adults' zero beverage choices are influenced by a culture that emphasizes appearance, social media approval, wellness trends, changing workplace culture, and consumption patterns that invest in health (Choi & Choi, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2020; Park & Lee, 2021). These factors are interrelated and compounding, and play an important role in shaping zero beverage consumption behaviors among young adults in South Korea.

### 3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method to gain an in-depth understanding of Korean young adults' experiences with zero beverage consumption. Based on the phenomenological approach proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018), it explores the subjective experiences and meanings of the research participants. This approach centers on individuals' lived experiences of the phenomenon of zero beverage consumption and is well-suited for understanding the nature and structure of that experience. Furthermore, by partially utilizing Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded

theory approach, we aim to draw theoretical insights from the collected data that are relevant to the context of Korean society.

Study participants will be selected using a purposive sampling method (Patton, 2015). The main selection criteria are Korean youth in their 20s and 30s, experience with zero beverage consumption in the last 6 months, and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. We plan to recruit a total of 10-15 participants, which may be adjusted according to the principle of data saturation (Guest et al., 2006). Participant recruitment will be done through social media advertisements, university bulletin boards, and a snowball sampling method. These different recruitment methods will contribute to the diversity of participants and increase the credibility of the study.

The data collected will be analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as the main method of analysis. This method is useful for identifying and analyzing patterns within the data and is appropriate for understanding the meaning and context of the zero beverage consumption experience, which is the purpose of this study. The analysis process consists of six steps: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the report.

Furthermore, the constant comparative method suggested by Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach is utilized to explore the relationships between the themes that emerge and to develop theoretical insights.

### 4. Results

The perceptions and experiences of zero beverages among young adults in Korea were diverse and complex. Participants were ambivalent about zero beverages, perceiving them as a 'healthy alternative' but also as an 'artificial product'. While most participants chose zero beverages to manage their weight and reduce sugar intake, some expressed concerns about artificial sweeteners. Sharing information about zero beverages, especially via social media, was found to have a strong influence on consumption decisions (Kim & Lee, 2022). We also observed that zero beverage consumption was seen as a form of 'health care' and used as a means of self-identity expression (Park et al., 2023).

Korean young adults' views of health and wellness were found to be shifting away from traditional notions of health and towards a more comprehensive and personalized form. Participants valued not only their physical health but also their mental and social well-being, and were engaging in a variety of practices to achieve this. In particular, there was a strong tendency to pursue health and happiness through daily beverage choices in conjunction with the concept of "small but sure happiness" (Lee et al., 2022). In addition,

health management using digital devices and sharing health information through social media were found to play an important role in shaping young adults' health awareness (Kang & Kim, 2023).

Zero beverage choices among young adults in South Korea were found to be made in a variety of sociocultural contexts: the ideal of a “healthy body” combined with a culture that emphasizes physical appearance was the primary motivator for zero beverage choices, and changes in workplace culture were increasing the tendency to choose zero beverages instead of alcohol at social events (Choi & Park, 2022). The visualization of beverage consumption through social media and the culture of “certification” were also found to be important factors influencing zero beverage choice, with zero beverage consumption being used as a means to express an identity as a health-conscious and trend-sensitive “sophisticated consumer” (Kim et al., 2023).

We found that zero beverage consumption plays an important role in identity formation among young adults in South Korea. Participants tended to define themselves as health-conscious and capable of self-care through their zero beverage choices. In particular, sharing zero beverage-related posts on social media was utilized as a means to build a self-image of pursuing a 'healthy lifestyle' (Lee & Kim, 2022). Furthermore, zero beverage consumption was found to contribute to expressing a particular identity and creating a sense of belonging within peer groups, which is linked to Goffman's (1959) impression management theory, showing that zero beverage consumption serves as a means to express the self in social interactions (Park et al., 2023).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study show that zero beverage consumption among young adults in Korea is a complex sociocultural phenomenon that goes beyond a simple preference or health choice. Zero beverage consumption is located at the intersection of personal perceptions of health, social norms, and identity expression. In particular, the spread of health information and the visualization of consumption through social media are linked to Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital, suggesting that zero beverage consumption functions as a kind of cultural capital. In addition, the conflict between health and taste, natural and artificial, and natural and artificial in the process of choosing zero beverages reflects the ambivalence of modern consumer society.

### 5.2. Comparison with Existing Research

The results of this study show several important differences from existing zero beverage consumption research. First, while most of the previous studies focused on health and weight management aspects, this study deeply explored the sociocultural context and identity formation process of zero beverage consumption. Second, while the previous studies were mainly set in Western societies (Brown et al., 2021), this study sheds new light on the specific cultural context of South Korea, especially the impact of social media culture and the “small action” trend on zero beverage consumption. Finally, this study expanded our understanding of the psychosocial aspects of beverage choice by revealing strategies for self-presentation and impression management through zero beverage consumption.

### 5.3. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings of this study have a number of theoretical and practical implications. First, on the theoretical side, this study provided a new perspective on the convergence of consumer behavior theory, health psychology, and cultural studies. In particular, by applying Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to the context of beverage consumption in contemporary Korean society, we demonstrated how health-related consumption serves as a means of social distinction. This supports the argument that health behaviors should be understood within a sociocultural context and not simply as individual choices.

Furthermore, by applying Goffman's impression management theory to consumption behaviors in the digital age, this study reveals how the visualization of zero beverage consumption through social media contributes to self-identity construction, which provides important insights into understanding how online and offline consumption behaviors are interconnected to influence identity formation. Furthermore, we expanded the concept of health literacy to highlight the importance of 'digital health literacy' in the social media era, which points to the need for future research on the digitization of health information and its impact.

In practical terms, the findings of this study have useful implications for the food and beverage industry, marketing professionals, and public health policymakers. First, it suggests that food and beverage companies should consider not just calories or nutrition, but also consumers' desire to express their identity and socio-cultural trends when formulating product development and marketing strategies. For example, they may consider strategies that emphasize images such as “healthy lifestyle” or “sophisticated consumer” through the package design or advertising messages of zero beverages.

For marketers, it suggests the importance of leveraging social media to market zero beverages. In particular, marketers may consider using influencer marketing or user-generated content (UGC) to increase the social visibility of zero beverage consumption, which can strengthen the brand image. They may also consider designing campaigns that emphasize zero beverage consumption as a small, everyday health practice, in line with the “small action” trend.

For public health policymakers, this suggests that they should consider changes in the way young people perceive and practice health when formulating health policies. For example, when developing health education programs, it is necessary to consider information delivery and campaigns using social media as well as traditional methods. It also suggests the need for education to provide accurate information and a balanced view of alternatives such as zero beverages.

Additionally, when creating policies to improve workplace culture, you may want to consider reducing alcohol-centric socializing and promoting a variety of options, including zero drinks as a healthy alternative. This would not only improve the health of workers, but also contribute to increased productivity.

Finally, by showing that zero beverage consumption is a complex sociocultural phenomenon, rather than a simple individual choice, this study highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in future health-related research and policy formulation. Experts from a variety of fields, including nutrition, psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology, will need to work together to understand modern food and beverage consumption behaviors from a multidisciplinary perspective and seek ways to improve them. These multifaceted implications will contribute to understanding the complex interplay of health, consumption, and identity formation in contemporary Korean society through the phenomenon of zero beverage consumption, and can serve as a basis for future research and policy formulation.

## 6. Implication and Conclusion

This study explored in-depth the experiences of zero beverage consumption among young adults in South Korea in a sociocultural context. The findings show that zero beverage consumption is a complex sociocultural phenomenon that goes beyond a simple health choice.

Young adults were expressing their health consciousness, self-management skills, and trend-sensitive identities through zero beverages, which were closely connected to social media culture. In particular, the tension between health and taste and natural and artificial in the choice of zero beverages reflected the ambivalence of modern

consumer society. In addition, changes in workplace culture and the “small affirmation” trend were found to influence zero beverage consumption. These findings suggest that health behaviors need to be understood within a sociocultural context, rather than as individual choices. Future research should further explore the universality and specificity of this phenomenon through intergenerational or cross-national comparisons.

Limitations of this study include the sample selection, which was limited to a specific region and age group, and future studies with more diverse populations will be needed. Nevertheless, this study provides important insights into the beverage consumption culture and health perceptions of contemporary Korean society, and can serve as a useful basis for developing relevant policies and marketing strategies. While this study provided important insights into the zero beverage consumption experiences of young adults in South Korea, it has several limitations. First, the study participants were mainly limited to those in their 20s and 30s in Seoul and the metropolitan area, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the entire Korean youth population. The experiences of young adults in rural or urban areas may be different, which should be considered in future research.

Second, this study adopted a cross-sectional research design, which only captured consumption experiences at a specific point in time. To identify changes in zero beverage consumption patterns or long-term effects, a longitudinal research design would be needed to explore how zero beverage consumption changes over time and what long-term effects it has on individuals' health and identity formation (Lee & Kim, 2023). Third, this study explored the phenomenon primarily from the perspective of consumers; future research should include the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as zero beverage producers, marketing professionals, and health experts, to develop a more comprehensive understanding. This will help to understand the overall ecosystem of the zero beverage industry (Choi et al., 2022).

As future research directions, we propose, first, a comparative study of generational differences in zero beverage consumption. It would be an interesting research topic to explore how the perception and consumption patterns of zero beverages differ across generations, including Gen Z, Millennials, and Gen X. Second, research on the relationship between zero beverage consumption and mental health is also needed. Exploring how zero beverage consumption is related to body dissatisfaction or eating disorders could connect to important public health issues. Finally, cross-national comparative studies would be meaningful to understand the specificity and universality of zero beverage consumption culture in Korea.

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## Appendix: Interview Questionnaire

### 1. Perceptions and experiences with zero beverages

What image do you have of zero beverages?  
When and how did you become familiar with zero beverages?  
In what situations do you typically choose zero beverages?  
What information do you consider when choosing a zero beverage, and how do you get that information?

### 2. Perspectives on health and wellness

What do you think health is?  
What do you do to be healthy in your daily life?  
How do you think zero beverage consumption affects your health?  
How well do you think you understand health information related to zero beverages?  
How do you expect zero beverage consumption to affect your health in the long term?

### 3. Sociocultural context of zero beverage choices

What do people around you (family, friends, coworkers, etc.) think about zero beverages?  
Have you seen posts about zero beverages on social media, and has that influenced your choice?  
What do you think it means to choose zero beverages at work or school?  
Does choosing zero beverages make you feel like you belong to a certain social group?

### 4. Zero beverage consumption and identity formation

What images do you have of people who drink zero beverages?  
What message do you want to convey about yourself by choosing zero beverages?  
Do you think your zero beverage consumption reflects your lifestyle or values?  
Do you think your consumption of zero beverages affects your social image or status?

### 5. Zero Beverages and Modern Korean Society

What do you think are the reasons for the growing popularity of zero beverages in Korean society?  
How do you think the zero beverage consumption trend is affecting the beverage culture or health culture in Korea?  
How do you expect the zero beverage market to change in Korea in the future?  
What values or trends do you think zero beverage consumption reflects in Korean society?

### 6. Zero Beverages as Cultural Capital

What do you think knowledge of zero beverages means socially?

Do you think preferring a particular brand or type of zero beverage is indicative of personal taste or social status?

Do you think that zero beverage consumption is associated with a 'sophisticated' or 'healthy' image in contemporary Korean society?