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Spirits sales in Britain’s pubs fell 23.5% in early November

NielsenIQ said cautious consumer spending also dragged down wine and beer as the hospitality trade looked to Christmas

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Drinks sales in Britain’s pubs, bars and other on-premise venues weakened in the first half of November, with spirits posting the sharpest declines, according to an analysis published by NielsenIQ on November 20.

NIQ said the market had a soft start to the month as cautious consumer spending weighed on sales in hospitality. The company’s figures showed spirits sales fell 23.5% year over year in the week ended November 7 and 20.9% in the week ended November 14.

Wine and beer also declined, though by less than spirits. Wine sales were down 11.2% in the week ended November 7 and 6% in the week ended November 14. Beer sales fell 6.2% in the first of those weeks and 2.8% in the second.

The numbers point to broad-based pressure across major drinks categories at venues where consumers drink on site, even as the rate of decline eased somewhat in the second reported week. Spirits remained the weakest segment in both periods, suggesting that higher-ticket serves and discretionary spending on mixed drinks and shots were under particular strain.

NIQ described the slowdown as a weak opening to November and said the trade was looking to the festive period for a lift. That leaves pubs, bars, restaurants and drinks suppliers heading into a critical stretch of the year, when seasonal gatherings typically help support sales of beer, wine and spirits.

For the beverage industry, the early-November performance may raise pressure on holiday trading plans. A softer on-premise market before Christmas can affect expectations for sales volumes, stock levels and promotional activity across categories, especially for spirits, which showed the biggest drop in both weeks.

The figures also suggest that any recovery in on-premise demand remains uneven. Beer and wine showed a smaller year-over-year decline by the week ended November 14 than they did a week earlier, but both categories were still below the same period a year ago. Spirits, while improving slightly from the prior week, were still down by more than one-fifth.

NIQ’s analysis adds to concerns about consumer caution in Britain’s hospitality sector at a time when operators usually begin building momentum for year-end trading. The coming weeks are likely to matter not only for pub and bar revenues, but also for producers and distributors deciding how much stock to place behind seasonal demand for wine, beer and liquor.