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“More Than Just a Vehicle for Getting Drunk”: Class, (Serious) Leisure and the Discerning ‘No and Low’ Craft Beer Drinker

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on alcohol consumption and leisure illuminates the ways in which drinking practices—including a preference for “craft” products—are entangled with notions of taste and distinction and linked to classed drinking identities and modes of “serious leisure”. However, little is known about how this plays out for light drinkers or short or long-term abstainers from alcohol. These supposed non-consumers have traditionally been located on the periphery of dominant drinking cultures. However, an expanding market of craft and speciality No and Low alcohol (NoLo) drinks in Western contexts presents new opportunities for light/nondrinkers to “do” leisure, (re) engage with the market and construct discerning (non)drinking identities. Drawing on findings from in-depth interviews with UK-based NoLo drinkers, this paper highlights how craft NoLo consumers draw on themes of skill, taste and expertise to align themselves with the discerning (middle-class) drinker and perform or embody modes of serious leisure.

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Introduction

I used to know my ales. I kind of miss that now [I’m not drinking], I feel like I’ve gone back to [alcohol-free] mainstream lagers rather than being like, ‘Oh, what’s this nice local ale I can try?’ It was almost like a marker of good taste and knowledge, and... now it’s like I can’t be that person.

Returning to the interview transcripts from my research with recently sober women in 2019, I was struck by the above extract. As the interview wound down and the participant asked me to share something of my own experiences of abstinence, I quickly positioned myself as someone who not only used to drink “nice, local ales” but really “*know(s)* my ales”. I was—by my own account—the type of drinker who rejected mass-produced goods in favor of local products, a drinker with “good taste and knowledge”. As someone who was not drinking at the time of data collection, I found myself suddenly located outside

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of these specific drinking cultures and felt a sense of loss (not just of practices but of identity) as I resorted to drinking the mainstream lagers that were at the time more readily available as No and Low alcohol - or NoLo - drinks). My sense of exclusion from certain drinking and leisure practices is likely far from unique amongst light or nondrinkers, particularly within “cultures of intoxication” such as the United Kingdom where drinking is normalized and expected (Measham & Brain, 2005), even as the range of NoLo drinks is expanding. This article draws on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with an understudied group—NoLo drinkers—who have traditionally been positioned on the periphery of dominant drinking and consumer cultures. It highlights the opportunities for novel forms of consumption, classed identity work and ways to perform “serious leisure” (Stebbins, 2007) presented by an expanding craft NoLo market in the UK, exploring how craft NoLo consumers draw on themes of skill, taste and expertise to situate their (non)drinking practices, whilst also justifying a refusal to consume alcohol as they value NoLos as “more than just a vehicle for getting drunk”.

What and how we consume plays a central role in both leisure practices and identity construction in a neoliberal, late-capitalist society. Alcohol consumption is no exception, indicating taste and status (Järvinen et al., 2014), helping us to craft specific gendered and classed identities (Spracklen et al., 2013) and marking a transition to leisure time (Smith, 2013). Those who refuse to—quite literally—buy into such drinking cultures may experience exclusion or stigma (Herman-Kinney & Kinney, 2013). Having said this, recent years have seen the rapid expansion of a NoLo¹ alcohol market (Corfe et al., 2020); offering light drinkers, nondrinkers and short or long-term abstainers viable alternatives to alcohol and ways to (re)engage with drinking and consumer cultures rather than simply exiting the market or self-excluding from leisure spaces. This includes a range of speciality “craft” products that may support consumers to “do” leisure and identity in particular ways. Yet very little is known about how NoLo drinkers use these products or the ways in which they might facilitate novel consumption patterns, meaningful leisure practices and (non)drinking identities.

This article extends previous findings on craft beer consumption and serious leisure (Thurnell-Read, 2016), whilst highlighting the ways in which NoLo drinkers position themselves as knowledgeable, passionate and discerning (non)drinkers who rationalize their practices through implicitly classed-based othering; aligning with certain types of -middle-class - drinkers whilst establishing distance from the trope of the working-class lager drinker. This process draws boundaries to establish who/what one is by creating distance from the perceived “other” and is often used by members of a relatively dominant group to validate and reaffirm their own identities through the exclusion of the less powerful (Holt & Griffin, 2005; Lawler, 2005). Amongst craft NoLo drinkers, this shores up classed distinctions, challenges the idea that abstinence is a form of non-consumption and allows NoLo consumers to position themselves as serious—but importantly, not *too* serious—about their leisure practices. Such findings have implications for the ways in which we conceptualize non-consumption, serious leisure and leisure more broadly.

Alcohol (non)consumption and identity

In a neoliberal, late-capitalist society, we experience an imperative to consume in ways that shape bodies and identities (Featherstone, 2007), and contemporary consumption

choices function as a form of identity work (Nicholls, 2021). An individual is expected to literally “consume oneself into being” (Walkerdine, 2003, p. 247); to create a self that is read by others as successful through making the “right” consumer choices (including in relation to alcohol consumption). Whilst research suggests that working-class consumers may frame their consumption practices in terms of sociality and lack of pretentiousness (Thirlway, 2019) or anti-snobbery and down-to-earthness (Jarness & Flemmen, 2019), consumption choices may also communicate taste and status and establish distinctions between social groupings for the middle-classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Researchers have examined such phenomenon through the study of - for example - coffee drinking (Adams & Raisborough, 2008), dietary choices (Baumann et al., 2022) and ethical consumption practices (Cowe & Williams, 2000). In “cultures of intoxication” such as the UK where drinking is normalized (Measham & Brain, 2005), scholars have also explored the links between alcohol consumption, taste and status in relation to wine (Brierley-Jones et al., 2014), real ale (Spracklen et al., 2013) and craft beer (Chapman et al., 2018; Ikäheimo, 2020). Alcohol consumption is also a key aspect of contemporary leisure (Moran & Gallant, 2020); signaling a transition to leisure time and a mode of time out from everyday responsibilities (Smith, 2013; Zajdow & MacLean, 2014).

A refusal to participate in dominant drinking cultures has been understood through the lenses of “non-consumption” or “voluntary simplification” (Gram et al., 2017; Piacentini & Banister, 2009) or even conceptualized as a form of “anti-consumption” or resistance to social norms and embedded dominant drinking cultures (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013; Fry, 2011). This implies non-drinking may be a political or moral choice that is decidedly counter-normative or even deviant (Herman-Kinney & Kinney, 2013), firmly situated outside of dominant social, cultural and drinking norms. However, this fails to capture the reality of contemporary abstinence practices. As Nixon (2020) argues, further research is needed to interrogate these *supposed* practices of non-consumption. This is particularly relevant in light of the expanding market of NoLo products, which are often the same price as—or more expensive than - alcoholic drinks and are more likely to be drunk by affluent consumers (Holmes et al., 2024). Many leading players within the alcohol industry now offer a direct NoLo equivalent of their flagship alcoholic products (Corfe et al., 2020) and the UK NoLo market was valued at over £221 million in 2021 (Holmes et al., 2024). In addition, NoLo beer has been identified as one of the UK’s fastest-growing drinks trends (Robinson, 2019, as cited in Corfe et al., 2020), accounting for 77% of NoLo sales in 2021 (Holmes et al., 2024). The increased availability of such products offers consumers opportunities to continue to drink products that strongly resemble alcohol in terms of branding, taste, smell and appearance, yet research into the ways in which they are used remains limited.

The emergence and growth of the ‘craft’ alcohol market

Alongside the more commercialized face of public drinking, recent years have seen a so-called craft beer revolution in the UK in relation to both alcoholic and—more recently—NoLo drinks (Chapman et al., 2017; Wallace, 2019). Craft beer² encompasses a range of beer and ale products that are typically produced by small-scale, independent or artisan brewers (Ikäheimo, 2020), representing a pushback against mass

production/consumption and homogeneity from producers and consumers seeking “authenticity” (Kuehn & Parker, 2021; Thurnell-Read, 2019). This includes breweries dedicated to the exclusive production of NoLo lagers, stouts, porters or pale ales, and a distinction between mass-produced and craft products can now be observed both in the alcoholic and NoLo industries. Craft products are positioned as rooted in the local (Schnell & Reese, 2003)—in contrast to commercial, mainstream products produced on a global scale—and their consumption can serve as a marker of taste and discernment that facilitates the construction of specific classed identities such as the craft beer aficionado (Ikäheimo, 2020) or the hipster (Spracklen et al., 2013).

Craft consumption may bestow status or capital on the consumer. Capital takes various forms but of particular interest here is the “cultural capital” which can be acquired through consuming so-called high-brow or refined goods (Bourdieu, 1984) and displaying the skills and competences to consume these in particular ways. Such forms of capital are frequently (a) embodied, for example in the rituals and knowledges around how a product *should* be consumed (knowing how to serve, drink or “pair” a craft beer) and (b) objectified or embedded within a product (the beer itself). The ways in which capital is accrued are dependent on one’s habitus or the collective and structured social worlds in which one is situated (Brierley-Jones et al., 2014); a cultural hierarchy is created and cultural legitimacy or recognition is bestowed on those who can consume the right products in the right ways in a particular space, context or setting (Darwin, 2018; Jæger et al., 2023). In addition, NoLo consumption and a desire to drink more “moderately” or reduce consumption may be bound up with notions of status or capital; with middle-class consumers much more likely—and perhaps able—to buy into wider “wellness” cultures and express enthusiasm for “sober curiosity” or alcohol reduction (Lunnay et al., 2022).

These types of consumption have also been represented as forms of “serious leisure” i.e. a hobby or leisure activity requiring perseverance and effort in which a participant is significantly invested, facilitating the development of a sustained leisure commitment or even career over time (Lamont et al., 2014; Stebbins, 2007). Participation in serious leisure is associated with knowledge, specialized skills and investment (in terms of time, energy, money). It involves a shared set of values, terminology and practices amongst practitioners and may even be bound up with collective and individual identity (Stebbins, 2007). Thurnell-Read’s (2016) work on the consumption of craft beer/real ale and involvement in consumer movement CAMRA³ (the Campaign for Real Ale) is illuminating in this respect, highlighting the ways in which time, energy and finances are invested in the development of the skills, taste and knowledge to consume certain beers in particular and committed ways, whilst rejecting “easily consumed and mass-produced” options (p. 68). Status is conferred in relation to craft beer through the performance of particular shared rituals and practices, and the embodiment of particular skills and forms of knowledge in community leisure spaces such as taprooms and craft beer festivals (Ikäheimo, 2020; Spracklen et al., 2013). Chapman et al. (2017) note that craft beer is also becoming increasingly socially stratified and shaped by notions of the “academic” (p. 8) as the status of beer shifts from working-class, masculinized product to source of cultural prestige and social status.

As Stebbins (2007) notes, serious leisure may also be associated with “costs” such as the risk of marginality; for the real ale consumer this may involve negotiating or

resisting traditional stereotypes—the unfashionable, beer-bellied middle-aged man or “snob” with an obsessive interest in beer (Thurnell-Read, 2016). At the very least, the craft scene is notably white, male and middle-class (Chapman & Brunisma, 2020), whilst the drawing of distinctions between craft and mainstream products risks creating a false dichotomy between the supposedly sophisticated middle-class craft drinker and their unsophisticated working-class counterpart (Thurnell-Read, 2019). Such dichotomies ignore the important role that drinking can play in facilitating socializing, relaxation and identity formation for both middle-class *and* working-class consumers (Casey, 2020; Rúdólfssdóttir & Morgan, 2009). Furthermore, even as craft beer production/consumption is associated with authenticity, status, taste or the “local” in the face of a capitalist co-option of leisure, it continues to represent a way to engage with dominant drinking and consumer cultures (Spracklen et al., 2013) and is now itself a “multibillion dollar global industry” (Kuehn & Parker, 2021 p. 521).

Whilst previous research into craft beer consumption is valuable, it does not account for the recent expansion of the market to include craft NoLo products. The craft NoLo market may facilitate novel modes of consumption and leisure opportunities for light and nondrinkers. Yet there is very limited research into the experiences and practices of both drinkers and nondrinkers who consume NoLos (Rehm et al., 2016), and none that considers social class or the ways in which NoLo consumption links explicitly to leisure. Despite declining drinking rates across high-income countries such as the UK (Pape et al., 2018), we understand very little about how these products are used, their possible role in classed identity formation and their potential to (re)locate very light and nondrinkers *within* dominant drinking and leisure cultures and spaces, rather than outside of them. Previous research into drinking - or in this case non-drinking - and leisure also tends to draw on a “health and harm” discourse (considering consumption through a lens of risk rather than pleasure) and largely focuses on drinking as an add-on element of other leisure activities (such as sport and tourism) rather than exploring alcohol (or NoLo) consumption as a leisure practice in its own right (Moran & Gallant, 2020); Thurnell-Read’s (2016) work on serious leisure represents a welcome exception. Drawing on interview data with regular NoLo consumers, this paper addresses these gaps and explores the ways in which craft NoLo consumers frame their (non)drinking practices as forms of serious leisure that employ classed processes of othering.

Methodology

The findings presented emerged from a small-scale, exploratory study into the ways in which NoLo products are marketed and consumed, funded by the Institute of Alcohol Studies. Alongside analysis of marketing campaigns and social media for leading NoLo products, 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were undertaken with UK-based drinkers and nondrinkers who consume NoLos. Interviews facilitated the collection of rich and detailed data (Warren, 2002) and explored participants’ (non) drinking biographies and histories, including consideration of the contexts and leisure spaces in which they consumed NoLo drinks and their motivations for doing so. Following institutional ethical approval from the University of York, participants were recruited through social media, including the Club Soda Facebook page (an online

community centered around “mindful drinking”). Snowball sampling was also used, encouraging viewers to share posts within their own social networks to reach a wider audience.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and, recognizing that alcohol use could be a sensitive subject, data was anonymised and pseudonyms were assigned. Support organization information was available on the Participant Information Sheet and highly personal questions were avoided (although in practice participants were happy to share their own experiences and generally talked openly). My own positionality as a NoLo drinker also offered opportunities to build rapport in the interview setting. I avoided details of my own preference for craft products (the extract at the start of the article representing an exception in the more informal post-interview wind-down). Rather, I presented as a casual but enthusiastic NoLo drinker interested to hear about participants’ own preferences, experiences and recommendations.

Seven participants identified as male and eight female; nine as drinkers and six as former drinkers (none were lifelong nondrinkers) (they were asked if they broadly identified as a ‘drinker’, ‘never drinker’ or ‘former drinker’, but some offered variations on these such as ‘moderating drinker’ (see [Table 1](#))). Nine self-identified as middle-class but 12 (80% of the sample) worked in what might be classified as solidly middle-class occupations (including managerial roles, social work, education and research). The middle-class bias was likely compounded through the snowball and social media recruitment that was necessary when undertaking this research during the COVID-19 pandemic, but likely also says something about who is primarily consuming NoLos (Anderson et al., 2021). All participants resided in the UK at the time of the research and all except two were White British.

At the time of the research, three participants had stopped drinking for a short-term, defined period (for example due to pregnancy or a “health kick”) whilst seven were longer-term very light or nondrinkers (for reasons often tied to mental and/or physical health). A third were “hybrid” consumers who consumed both alcohol and NoLo products; generally they drank NoLos to help to cut down their overall alcohol consumption or avoid the effects of drinking such as hangovers.

Table 1. Participant details.

Consumption at time of interview	Typical consumption trends	Pseudonym, age, self-selected drinking identity and indication of craft consumption
Short-term nondrinkers	All self-defined as drinkers, short-term period of sobriety with defined end date	Alice, 32 (Drinker) Pete, 38 (D) Nina, 45 (Moderating Drinker)
Longer-term very light or nondrinkers	All defined as nondrinkers or extremely light drinkers, several envisaged long-term sobriety	Adam, 37 (Former Drinker) (craft) Luke, 29 (FD) (craft) Suzanne, 52 (FD) (craft) Hannah, 30 (FD) (craft) Rob, 34 (FD) (craft) Zara, 42 (FD) Jacqueline, 68 (Low-level Drinker)
Hybrid consumers	All self-defined as drinkers, mix of NoLos and alcohol (for example NoLos during the week or at home)	Emma, 31 (D) Christiaan, 41 (D) Liam, 26 (D) (craft) Ed, 42 (D) (craft) Georgie, 22 (D)

All interviews were conducted by me online between June and July 2021 and lasted 45-90 minutes. During this period, the UK had fairly recently emerged from "lockdowns" (restrictions on social mixing and closure of licensed venues) associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the interviews did not explicitly ask about pandemic experiences and participants did not tend to focus on this. For example, their tendency to drink NoLos at home (see later discussion) was more likely to be framed as an issue of availability and product choice rather than a legacy of the pandemic. Audio was recorded and transcribed; data was then coded into themes firstly within interviews and then across them, drawing on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and using both an inductive and deductive approach (Joffe, 2012) i.e. I had some sense of possible themes and areas of focus that might emerge but remained open to themes organically rising from the data. The analysis was also shaped in part by stage one of the research (the media analysis) which had already identified pertinent themes in NoLo marketing. These informed the interview analysis and were then later cross-referenced back to interview themes to identify crossovers and differences. Discussion of findings below necessarily centers mainly—but not exclusively—on the experiences of the seven craft NoLo drinkers (see Table 1). Several of the longer-term former drinkers or very light drinkers identified as craft drinkers (five out of seven); a smaller proportion of the hybrid drinkers did so (two out of five), and none of the shorter-term nondrinkers identified in this way.

Findings

"A favourite subject of mine": Constructing the knowledgeable and discerning craft NoLo drinker

Several participants—both craft and non-craft drinkers - reflected with enthusiasm on the expanding NoLo market and felt that this was a positive development providing enhanced choice and flexibility for consumers. In this way, they quickly situated themselves *within* consumer culture and—because they most valued products that tasted, looked and smelled like alcohol—arguably within dominant drinking cultures. Participants spoke with knowledge about the NoLo market, particularly in relation to beer, with several charting a move from a limited range of NoLo lagers to a diverse range of specialized products (including ales, porters, stouts and sour beers produced by smaller breweries). Participants who enjoyed consuming craft NoLo products also spoke about investing in new drinks as the market continues to grow:

This is a favourite subject of mine, because particularly over lockdown I have been getting lots of crates of tasters from Dry Drinker⁴ and everything. So I have got favourites of most alcohol-free things (Suzanne, 52)

I've actually quite enjoyed trying different ones as well. It's kind of a hobby. You can tick them off a list (Liam, 26)

Several participants framed their craft NoLo consumption as a "hobby" and displayed evidence of—at times significant—investment. Above, Suzanne describes talking about NoLo products as "a favourite subject", and later explains she has "tried quite a lot" of "interesting" products, including sour beers, lagers and stouts. Others discussed searching for niche products, often ordering from specialist websites (with some

alluding to the need to bulk buy to make delivery costs worthwhile or meet minimum spend/order requirements). In this way, the time, energy and money invested in the costly practice of NoLo consumption (Holmes et al., 2024) could be significant, more readily available to middle-class consumers - who research indicates are more likely to drink NoLos (Anderson et al., 2021) - and a form of serious leisure. In addition, Liam evokes the image of “ticking off” a range of products in aid of his hobby. These practices mirror those of (alcoholic) beer drinkers who may also track or display consumption, for example using apps or communities to “tick off” and rank beers (Chorley et al., 2021). Whilst Thurnell-Read (2016) cautions that the “ticker” risks being positioned as *too* serious about beer and may become a subject of ridicule, Liam displays no such hesitation in evoking this image. Indeed, as Ikäheimo (2020) argues, the act of ticking off beers could be framed as a form of conspicuous consumption or a way for middle-class consumers to accrue cultural capital through displaying knowledge of available products and the means to purchase and appreciate them.

Craft beer culture is often associated with public displays of expertise and cultural legitimacy is conferred through practices that are highly spatialized (Nanney et al., 2020) in leisure settings such as the taproom or beer festival. However, the comparative underrepresentation of craft NoLo products in licensed premises means that most NoLo consumption discussed by participants was performed in domestic space. In these private contexts, as suggested above, the internet played a key role in helping craft NoLo fans to research and purchase new products, including specialist or unusual beers or taster/sample packs. Ed (42) described having to “go digging” online to find products that are not available “from the local Co-op [supermarket]” and Rob (34) described the internet as a useful means to source beers that could otherwise be “very hard to get”. Liam (26) even articulated something of a tension around the increasing “mainstreaming” of NoLo products; his suggestion that “the thrill of the hunt” in sourcing NoLo drinks has lessened now that they are more readily available implies that NoLos used to be associated with a sense of exclusivity.

These consumption practices were also necessarily accompanied by particular sets of expertise and knowledge which mirrored those of alcohol consumers, such as knowing what products were “good” or knowing how to pair products with food:

I have got a little WhatsApp group with a couple of mates who don't drink, and we will text each other pictures of ones we have found and things like that, recommendations and stuff. So, yes, that has been a really nice thing as well, to say, “Have you seen this one around?” You get some really interesting ones, so there is a little element of, I guess, discovery (Ed, 42)

I get excited when I've got something new to try... [cut]... It's just like, “Oh, I'll try this one. Oh, there's an alcohol-free pilsner and I'll try the pilsner. Alright, what does the pilsner go with? It goes really well with a curry” (Adam, 37)

Ed and Adam position the discovery of new products as an enjoyable or exciting aspect of being a craft NoLo drinker, whilst also drawing attention to their own expertise. Ed's WhatsApp group functions as an online space in which to negotiate an identity as a NoLo connoisseur who is aware of a range of “really interesting” new products and possesses the expertise to assess their quality and make recommendations

(indeed several participants were keen to display their knowledge directly to me in the form of detailed recommendations during the interviews). Ed's group perhaps functions as something of an online substitute in the absence of the dedicated public spaces to perform and display one's knowledge that might be available to the alcohol consumer. Adam also displays his expertise in the interview context, demonstrating his ability to pair drinks with food. Elsewhere in the interview, he suggests the thing he misses most about drinking is enjoying alcohol and food pairings in "posh" restaurants, alluding to what Nanney et al. (2020) call "elite" consumption practices in particular classed spaces. Hannah (30), another former drinker, talked at length about her long-standing appreciation of craft products and the ways in which this was entangled with middle-class practices such as wine tasting, visiting new craft beer bars and subscribing to beer and gin delivery services. This had been an integral part of Hannah's drinking identity and social life, and she sought to emulate this in sobriety as much as possible. At times, this was directly possible (for example in craft beer bars or at beer festivals with a range of craft NoLo products) yet at others this might require some reworking; for example NoLo wine was regarded almost universally as poor quality, making wine tasting an undesirable proposition, whilst the fact that most craft NoLo consumption took place at home might limit opportunities for more public displays of skills and competencies. In this way, for former drinkers such as Adam and Hannah, the inherently classed skills, knowledges and forms of embodied cultural capital acquired through former drinking practices were not lost but transferred—albeit in slightly transformed ways—to non-drinking practices and identities.

The examples discussed here demonstrate the ways in which craft NoLo consumers sought to align their practices with those of the "sophisticated" (and implicitly middle-class) craft alcohol consumer. Through these kinds of framings, craft NoLo drinkers were able to position themselves as discerning, knowledgeable and adventurous (non)drinkers who were "serious" about and invested in their consumption practices.

"Beer snobs?": Distancing the self from the mainstream lager drinker

As Spracklen et al. (2013) note in their work on real ale consumption, notions of taste and discernment are not just used to define the self, but also to make distinctions between the self and the "other". Across the data, the drinking practices of the discerning craft NoLo drinker were frequently contrasted with those of the "mainstream" drinker:

Before [stopping drinking], I wouldn't just drink lager at home. I would enjoy trying different beers. So I am trying to, I guess, replicate that a little bit now.... not missing out and having what I would always deem as a standard/boring beer... a lager, if you like (Hannah, 30)

I've got friends that would just happily drink Carling and Fosters, and I've never understood that. There's such a diverse taste. There's a reason there's craft beer. There's people that put all their heart and soul into specific drinks... Every bottle or can has its own individual style because there is this craft and hobbyist mentality towards it. You know, people are now more invested in the esthetic of what they're drinking. And I guess the alcohol-free side has just kind of fallen really well into that (Adam, 37)

Here, lager (both NoLo and alcoholic) is positioned as a “standard/boring” beer; as “missing out”. In these examples, the contrast that is being drawn is arguably with particular types of mainstream alcohol consumers rather than NoLo consumers (as Carling does not offer a NoLo product and Fosters’ NoLo offering “Radler” is not widely available in the UK). The contrast between “standard/boring” and craft products is shown in Adam’s dismissal of those who “just” drink Carling and Fosters, mainstream and more affordable lagers which are widely available in the UK and draw on sports-based marketing and themes of masculinity and sexual innuendo (Horne & Whannel, 2009; Winpenney et al., 2014) to appeal to young, male consumers. In contrast, his references to “heart and soul”, investment and esthetic imbue craft drinks with a sense of perceived individuality, authenticity and craftsmanship that mainstream products supposedly lack (Spracklen et al., 2013). This was echoed by others such as Liam (26), who associated his NoLo consumption with adopting elements of an “alternate lifestyle” and—as discussed above—lamented to an extent the “mainstreaming” of NoLo products. Others such as Luke (29) talked about “immersion” in a craft scene and an interest in consuming “unique” and “local” products rather than—echoing Hannah’s language—“standard supermarket beer”. These kinds of references to those who *just* drink lager or “supermarket beer” arguably also function as a shorthand for talking about particular (assumed) working-class consumption patterns i.e. unquestioningly drinking mainstream, mass-produced and cheaper lagers (Thurnell-Read, 2016).

Whilst Adam establishes distance from such practices by positioning them as something he has “never understood”, he goes on to express a wariness of being labeled a “craft beer twat” with a “moustache” and “little notebook” for recording beers, suggesting a tension between the desire to be the discerning consumer and a concern that this could be associated with snobbery or stereotypes around craft beer consumption. This is mirrored in research on alcoholic craft beer where drinkers seek to establish distance from the *overly* elitist “beer snob” (Nanney et al., 2020). It also highlights a tension for the serious leisure participant; the desire to appear serious—but never too serious—about one’s hobby (Thurnell-Read, 2016). Other participants appeared to more readily accept notions of beer “snobbery”, albeit in something of a tongue-in-cheek way:

I can already see myself going back down that route of snobbery [with NoLos]. It is 100% something I am doing, well, replicating with alcohol-free... When I was a drinker, I was a total snob. (Laughter) (Luke, 29)

Here, Luke’s laughter arguably softens his claim and suggests he is being slightly self-deprecating, mitigating against the risk he might genuinely be seen as being too serious or too snobby about his craft consumption (Thurnell-Read, 2016).

Participants’ attempts to position their (non)consumption practices as tasteful and sophisticated—in contrast to those of the implicitly-working class “standard” beer drinker—may also represent an attempt to manage the stigma that might come with a refusal to consume alcohol. All—including non-craft drinkers—were aware that decisions to abstain were still in some ways located outside of UK cultural norms. Whilst drinking NoLos helped them to feel included socially and continue to engage with the market, they were also aware that their decision to substitute alcohol for a product that did not produce the same intoxicating effects might be met with judgment or

mockery. Emma (31) described initially feeling skeptical about NoLos, attributing a status to alcohol and acknowledging that its intoxicating effects were integral to its purpose. Several participants—both craft and non-craft drinkers—also slipped into using the language of “fake” or “pretend” to describe NoLos, implying that these might be read as (poor) substitutes for alcohol. Alice (32) worried that others might ask “why would you want to drink a knock-off version of alcohol?”, and Luke admitted:

A lot of people will say, “What is the point of drinking alcohol-free beer if there is no alcohol in it?” I would assume that those people would be happy with your standard supermarket beer and don’t have too much of an interest in the craft scene, but I do. I really like unique local sellers of beer or wine and things like that and exploring it as more than just a vehicle for getting drunk (Luke, 29)

In the interview, Luke charts his journey from a NoLo-skeptic to a dedicated fan who is able to appreciate these products for their uniqueness and flavor rather than simply as a means to achieve intoxication i.e. “more than just a vehicle for getting drunk”. In contrast, those who might be interested in drinking merely for the intoxicating effects are once more positioned as “standard supermarket beer” drinkers, again implicitly referencing social class. Several other participants also drew on the various pleasures associated with craft NoLo consumption (taste, esthetic, discovering and trying new products) that go beyond “drinking to get drunk” and established a distinction between the craft drinker and “those people” who “just happily drink Carling and Fosters”. Here, products like Carling become a shorthand for talking about social class and a contrast is established between the discerning craft NoLo drinker and the—working-class—lager-drinking other who is assumed to drink merely for the intoxicating effects and lacks a more “serious” appreciation of the “sophisticated” pleasures of consumption (Wallace, 2019).

Discussion

Craft NoLo drinkers talked with passion and knowledge about the products they enjoyed and invested time, resources and energy into their consumption practices. These practices can be understood as forms of serious leisure that mirror those of the (implicitly middle-class) craft alcohol drinker. For example, craft NoLo drinkers demonstrate knowledge about the “right” kinds of products (craft beer), purchase them from the “right” places (local sellers or specialist websites rather than supermarkets) *and* consume them in the “right” kinds of ways (for example through food pairings reminiscent of experiences at “posh” restaurants). These moves support craft NoLo consumers to enjoy forms of status and prestige and embody particular modes of classed cultural capital (Ward et al., 2022), particularly when the high costs of NoLos are considered (Holmes et al., 2024). For former drinkers, they may also allow for capital accrued as alcohol consumers to be retained in sobriety.

Attempts to create community (for example through sharing recommendations) also present opportunities to accrue cultural capital in ways that echo Ikäheimo’s (2020) positioning of alcoholic craft beer fandom as performed collectively through communal leisure practices, rituals and knowledge at beer festivals (see also Spracklen et al., 2013). As opportunities for public performances of the skills and knowledge associated

with craft NoLo consumption may still be restricted (due to the limited availability of these products in licensed premises), online spaces, communities or groups may become particularly useful spaces in which to display the discernment and dispositions that, for alcohol consumers, play out in taprooms, breweries, high-end restaurants or beer festival settings (Nanney et al., 2020). These community spaces may also present opportunities to co-construct the shared sets of values, practices and even collective identities that constitute serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007).

As previously discussed, serious leisure practitioners must also be mindful of the costs and opportunities for marginalization that accompany their practices. For beer consumers, these might include being read as a “snob” or boring and obsessive (Thurnell-Read, 2016), and there was certainly evidence that participants were aware of these stereotypes, distancing themselves from the “craft beer twat” or presenting their “snobbery” with humor and tongue-in-cheek self-awareness. However, it is also possible that these images and associations are shifting, for example with Spracklen et al. (2013) describing an expansion of the craft beer and real ale scene to encompass a younger generation of middle-class “hipster” drinkers. Chapman et al. (2018) also observe the increasing popularity of craft beer amongst female consumers—even as some gendered hierarchies persist and particular styles of beer within the scene still remain gendered in particular ways (Darwin, 2018). Similarly, the stereotypical “ticker” (as embraced by Liam) might no longer be a source of ridicule, but rather a means to embrace a “beer geek” identity or situate oneself as an adventurous “cultural omnivore” (Darwin, 2018) (perhaps in part to mitigate against the risk of being stereotyped as a “boring” light or nondrinkers (Romo, 2012)).

The data presented here also indicates how distinctions are drawn not just through displays of taste, but also *distaste* (Bourdieu, 1984). The point of contrast is the trope of the unsophisticated drinker of “easily consumed and mass-produced options” (Thurnell-Read, 2016, p. 68). The use of language such as “craft”, “hobbyist” and “individuality” by participants valorizes both the consumption and production of craft beer (Wallace, 2019), and the craft NoLo drinker positions themselves as invested in their serious consumption practices, in contrast to those of someone who “just” drinks lager. The notion of “individuality” is mirrored in Graber et al.’s (2016) work on non-drinking, with sobriety aligned with notions of independence and non-conformity. In contrast, the standard or mainstream consumer of lager that has been mass-produced by “faceless brewing conglomerates” (Wallace, 2019, p. 955) is positioned as unthinking and unimaginative. In the data, references to “supermarket” beers became a shorthand way for participants to talk about the easily-sourced and ubiquitous NoLo or alcoholic options that are consumed by the masses and sit in opposition to the more “exclusive” products they prefer, with small-scale and supposedly authentic craft consumption grounded in notions of the local (Schnell & Reese, 2003). This echoes previous findings on the ways in which alcohol craft beer drinkers use spatial references to distinguish their own drinking and leisure practices in “local” and “proper” pubs from those of consumers in mainstream, corporate venues on the high street (Thurnell-Read, 2017). Such processes are again implicitly classed; reflections on the style and esthetic of craft NoLo products bring to mind Scott’s (2017) term “hipster capital”, whereby the creative labor of neo-artisanal entrepreneurs is deployed to sell a particular style or esthetic and its associated modes of “living well” to middle-class consumers. Through

making tasteful and stylish consumption choices, the craft NoLo consumer is able to embody a particular form of desired, classed identity as a very light or nondrinker, to contrast their consumption with that of the “standard” beer drinker and to position craft NoLos as a “status good” (Corfe et al., 2020).

In addition, craft NoLo drinkers seek to draw a line between their own responsible consumption and that of the working-class heavy drinker. Here, the “standard supermarket beer” drinker is presumed to use alcohol merely for its intoxicating effects, a supposedly unreflective consumer who is unable to appreciate the additional qualities associated with craft products. Such a consumer, according to participants, would likely see NoLo consumption as “a pointless affair” because the pleasures that “those people” derive from drinking center around intoxication (which cannot be achieved from NoLo products) rather than taste and experience. In this way, not only are mainstream lager drinkers positioned as “errant consumers” or “dupes” of capitalism (Thurnell-Read, 2017, 2019) who drink tasteless, mass-produced products, but they are potentially drunk, rowdy, excessive or aggressive “lager louts” or binge drinkers (Spracklen et al., 2013), presumed to consume large amounts of alcohol merely for the intoxicating effects rather than for an appreciation of taste or quality (see also Wallace, 2019).

Whilst previous research suggests that drinking practices are diverse and there is no neat divide between the civilized social drinker and rowdy binge drinker—indeed, consumers of alcoholic craft beer may be just as motivated by a desire to achieve intoxication as those who do not choose craft products (Hodge et al., 2022)—this is about creating classed distinctions that draw on tropes of the working-class as flawed consumers in two ways. Not only do they display supposed poor taste in their consumption of mainstream products, but the working-class body has long been associated with excess and a lack of control and restraint, subject to moralizing judgements and labeled as unruly and disgusting (Lawler, 2005). Whilst the original lager lout of the 1980s reflected wider cultural anxieties around social change and the regulation and governance of public drinking (Measham & Brain, 2005), the trope also functions here to provide a point of contrast for the “responsible” practices of craft NoLo consumers, highlighting the ways in which such tropes “produce *middle-classed* identities that rely on *not* being the repellent and disgusting ‘other’” (Lawler, 2005, p. 431). The body of the NoLo craft drinker is able to show restraint and engage in responsible consumption as a form of rationalized and controlled pleasure within a neoliberal context (Caluzzi et al., 2020), with the restrained and controlled middle-class consumer embodying notions of “wellness” and “sober curiosity” (Lunnay et al., 2022). This was evidenced in the data not only by longer-term nondrinkers but also by hybrid drinkers who framed their mixed consumption of both alcohol and NoLos as a means to achieve balance, moderation and a “healthy” relationship with alcohol. In this way, craft NoLo consumption is elevated and associated not only with taste, skill and knowledge but also with restraint, control and responsible consumption.

Conclusion

As this article demonstrates, NoLo consumption can usefully be conceptualized as a form of serious leisure; a leisure activity requiring perseverance and effort in which a participant is significantly invested, facilitating the development of a leisure career

(Lamont et al., 2014; Stebbins, 2007). These findings expand the earlier work of Thurnell-Read (2016), who positions consumption of real ale and involvement in consumer movement CAMRA as forms of serious leisure involving a collective set of values, terminology and practices and conferring both benefits and costs.

This article also encourages a reconfiguration of light and non-drinking practices as something that goes beyond simple non-consumption or resistance. These terms do not offer the nuance required to conceptualize the practices of those who are not disengaging from the market completely but, rather, substituting alcohol with an alternative—yet very similar—product. Indeed, the craft NoLo consumer remains embedded within a market system (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2013) through such acts of conspicuous consumption (Ikäheimo, 2020). NoLo consumers are thus located simultaneously within dominant drinking and consumer cultures (through their choice to consume products that strongly resemble alcohol) and outside of them (through their refusal to consume alcoholic products that facilitate the embodied effects of intoxication). Tensions around this might be negotiated through processes of class-based othering. As shown in this paper, this allows NoLo drinkers to continue to engage with the market *and* construct meaningful identities by simultaneously aligning with a particular type of—discerning and middle-class—craft alcohol drinker yet also establishing distance from the “mainstream” alcohol drinker i.e. “the hypothetical, and implicitly working-class binge drinker” (Thurnell-Read, 2017, p. 94). Such moves may help to manage any stigma that might come with refusal to buy into dominant drinking cultures (Advocat & Lindsay, 2015).

It is important to acknowledge that not only was the research sample predominantly middle-class, but most of the examples discussed here come from white, male participants. This reflects data suggesting NoLo products are primarily purchased by more affluent consumers (Anderson et al., 2021). It also highlights the intersections between beer and whiteness (Chapman & Brunsma, 2020) and beer and masculinity (Darwin, 2018), with previous research observing the devaluing of “feminised” drinks within the craft beer scene (Chapman et al., 2018) and suggesting it is easier for men to accrue cultural capital through the construction of the “beer geek” or omnivorous identity (Maciel, 2017). This study also focuses specifically on the experiences of drinkers and former drinkers who consume NoLos rather than lifelong nondrinkers, and whilst a formal coding and analysis process was adopted, my own positionality in approaching the data as a craft NoLo and alcohol drinker must be acknowledged. Although findings cannot be generalized and represent those of a small self-selecting sample, research in this area is extremely limited and so this work represents a useful exploratory study into the practices of an understudied and poorly understood group in a specific context (the UK). Further research is required as the NoLo market expands and as drinking rates continue to decline, including in other global contexts where the NoLo market is established but the norms, contexts and meanings around consumption (and class) might be different. There is also an increasing imperative to understand and encourage forms of reduced or non-consumption in affluent consumer societies to ensure a sustainable global future (Nixon, 2020), whilst also recognizing the *new* modes of consumption that abstinence may facilitate.

The findings discussed in this paper explore NoLo consumption as a distinct and pleasurable form of potentially serious leisure in its own right—rather than as an

“add-on” to other leisure practices such as travel and sport (Moran & Gallant, 2020)—and challenge the notion that decisions to refrain from drinking are necessarily forms of resistance, non-consumption or politicized anti-consumption. Far from being cut off from the market or shunning the alcohol industry, craft NoLo consumers engage—at times with much enthusiasm—in forms of conspicuous consumption that allow them to display the skill, expertise, investment and taste associated with forms of serious leisure whilst also shoring up class-based distinctions that reinforce understandings of the middle-class consumer as sophisticated, responsible and restrained. These observations may be highly applicable to other forms of supposed non-consumption—for example in considering the dietary practices of vegetarians/vegans—whilst also highlighting the continued entanglements of social class, taste and distinction entrenched in contemporary (non)consumption and serious leisure practices.

Notes

1. Defined in line with Department of Health and Social Care (2018) guidelines as beverages with an alcohol content ranging from 0.0-1.2% ABV.
2. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term ‘craft beer’ as a catch-all, umbrella term including and encompassing ‘real ale’, whilst recognising there are sometimes hotly contested disputes around the distinctions between the terms (see Brewdog, 2011 for a case in point).
3. CAMRA is a UK-based consumer organisation that advocates for wider availability of real ale, cider and perry in the beer and pub industry and the role of pubs in the UK’s cultural heritage - through - for example - lobbying government, political campaigning, offering pub guides and running beer festivals (CAMRA, 2020).
4. The website ‘Dry Drinker’ (which also offers an ‘alcohol free craft beer club’) was popular as it provides the option of ordering ‘taster’ packs or mixed cases of NoLo beers which could allow consumers to sample a wider range of products.

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Data availability statement

The data has not been uploaded to a public repository and is not publicly accessible.

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