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'Not Just Living in the Moment': Constructing the 'Enterprising' and Future-Oriented Self Through the Consumption of No-and-Low-Alcohol Drinks

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Emily Nicholls**

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Abstract

In contemporary, neoliberal contexts, individuals are compelled to display competent and 'enterprising' selves, to get ahead in 'hustle culture' and to prioritise their personal health/wellbeing and futures. Dominant drinking cultures that normalise binge drinking and 'living in the moment' sit at odds with such values, yet these tensions can be navigated through 'responsible' consumption, whereby consumers can continue to buy into dominant drinking cultures yet show restraint by drinking in moderation and/or participating in periods of abstinence. In recent years, an expanding market of 'no-and low-alcohol' (NoLo) drinks also presents increasing opportunities to negotiate new kinds of moderate drinking identities, take breaks from consumption or reconfigure relationships with alcohol entirely. Drawing on data from 15 interviews with regular NoLo drinkers, this article highlights the ways in which NoLo consumption is entangled with notions of the enterprising self in relation to health, choice/responsibility, productivity and the future. Using the consumption of NoLo drinks as a case study, the article contributes more widely to our understandings of how identities are negotiated and displayed through particular (non)consumption practices that take place in the present – but also construct the future self – in the face of neoliberal imperatives to be healthy and productive.

Keywords

alcohol, consumption, drinking, futures, neoliberalism, sobriety

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Introduction

In late-capitalist contexts, 'self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour' (Giddens, 1991: 5) marked by choice as individuals are required to negotiate a plurality of life options. Under neoliberalism, particular choices are labelled as 'good/bad' or 'right/wrong', and making the 'right' choices is a means to construct the 'enterprising self' (Rose, 1998) (a productive, future-focused consumer-citizen who takes responsibility for managing their health/wellbeing and embodies moderation and self-control).

The normalised practice of heavy drinking in high-income countries sits at odds with the notion of the enterprising self, leaving consumers engaged in a balancing act between participating in dominant 'cultures of intoxication' (Griffin et al., 2009) and negotiating the position of the 'responsible' drinker who drinks in moderation. However, moderation remains a poorly understood concept, and drinkers may have complex, ambivalent relationships with alcohol (De Visser and Smith, 2007). This ambivalence may be particularly notable in recent years in the United Kingdom and more widely. Drinking rates are declining among young people (Pape et al., 2018), temporary abstinence initiatives (such as 'dry months') are increasingly popular (De Visser et al., 2017), and new communities celebrating abstinence or mindful drinking as a positive lifestyle choice are proliferating (Davey, 2021).

Alongside these changes, we also see the growth of a lucrative 'no-and low-alcohol' (NoLo) drinks market (Corfe et al., 2020) (beverages with an alcohol content from 0.0%-1.2% alcohol by volume (ABV); Department of Health Social and Care, 2018). As NoLo beers, spirits and wines become more readily available, they offer new ways for non-drinkers and drinkers to consume products that resemble alcohol yet without some of the perceived negative consequences of drinking (and of course, a means for the alcohol industry – who often produce these drinks – to continue to engage with consumers even as drinking rates decline). NoLo consumption is thus a distinct practice that might support consumers to embody particular (non)drinking identities of moderation or abstinence, allowing them to show 'responsible' and future-focused behaviour without disengaging from dominant drinking cultures completely. However, very little is known about how such products are consumed or their role in constructing identities in neoliberal contexts.

This article addresses this gap, drawing on in-depth semi-structured interviews with NoLo drinkers to explore the role these products play in the construction of the future-orientated, responsible and enterprising consumer-self. It highlights the ways in which drinkers and non-drinkers use NoLos to construct identities as future-focused, enterprising selves, drawing on notions of productivity, choice and healthism. In doing so, the article identifies notable overlaps and uniformity across different accounts. Enhancing our understanding of the use of NoLo products can inform public health messaging and support consumers to develop more balanced relationships with alcohol or adopt short- or long-term abstinence. This research also develops our wider understanding of how consumption practices are negotiated under late-capitalism to produce enterprising selves (Rose, 1998). Crucially, this article highlights the ways in which consumption is managed against a backdrop of the dual neoliberal imperatives of productivity and healthism and the impetus to make consumption choices *now* that craft the 'right' sort of self in the

future, addressing a further gap in our understanding of how future subjectivities are imagined (France et al., 2019). These imperatives are likely to shape other modes of consumption and identity work in late-capitalist environments.

The enterprising self, alcohol consumption and ‘moderation’

Within the neoliberal context of the United Kingdom, individuals supposedly experience increasing freedom to make choices in all areas of their lives, including in relation to consumption (Burgess et al., 2022). Yet this comes with pressures to make the ‘right’ choices to inform and shape one’s lifecourse. As Rose (1998) argues, individuals experience a moral imperative to display a productive and ‘enterprising’ self who is successful and future-orientated. Individuals must create a coherent narrative where the past *and* the future are outcomes of reflexive personal choices (Cook, 2018) and future risk is managed (Cairns and Johnston, 2015). The enterprising self must also discipline the body (Beck, 1992), display self-restraint and prioritise health and wellbeing. Responsibility is placed upon individuals to pro-actively adopt health-promoting behaviours and make the ‘right’ choices *now* (Crawford, 1980) to avoid becoming a burden on the state in the future (Robert, 2022). Cederström and Spicer (2015) refer to this as ‘healthism’; individually managing one’s health becomes a *moral* obligation in the construction of ‘healthy’ futures.

Yet these dual expectations of productivity and healthism sit alongside dominant drinking cultures that encourage alcohol consumption. Cherrier and Gurrieri (2013) describe the endurance of a ‘cultural template that normalizes drinking and delineates alcohol consumption as a cultural imperative’ (p. 233) in the United Kingdom. Binge drinking, intoxication and ‘determined drunkenness’ (Griffin et al., 2009) can facilitate pleasure, intimacy and fun (Bancroft et al., 2014) and play a key role in relaxation and friendships (Niland et al., 2013). At the same time, drinkers are required to balance the demands for excessive consumption with a recognition that practices deemed *too* irresponsible may be seen as moral failings (Griffin et al., 2009); alcohol sustains its own demand in a consumer society, but ‘too much’ renders the drinker less useful and productive (Room, 2011: 50). Thus, while a degree of consumption is encouraged, elements of ‘moral panic’ endure around binge drinking (Yeomans, 2009), and consumers are compelled to show restraint and engage in ‘responsible’ consumption. Lupton (2018) terms this the ‘neoliberal paradox’ – the simultaneous pressure to consume *and* demonstrate self-control – a tension that is illustrated neatly through marketing campaigns that call for ‘responsible’ drinking yet continue to position drinking as cool and glamorous (Gallage et al., 2020). Here, ‘moderation’ offers the desirable counterbalance to ‘excess’ (Yeomans, 2013) and becomes an inherently valued goal (Caluzzi et al., 2020), while calls to ‘drink responsibly’ support the alcohol industry’s ambitions to continuing self-regulating and push responsibility for managing consumption onto individuals.

However, ‘moderation’ remains a vague concept that consumers may find difficult to practice (Gallage et al., 2020), and alcohol increasingly occupies a somewhat ambivalent space in the United Kingdom. While previous research depicts an entrenched ‘culture of

intoxication' (Griffin et al., 2009), non-drinking is arguably no longer 'counter-normative' (Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2013), with young people drinking less than previous generations (Pape et al., 2018). Recent research attributes this to productivity and healthism, areas young people prioritise as they are increasingly future-focused. Caluzzi et al. (2021a) suggest young Australians feel increasing pressure to prioritise 'healthy' lifestyles, view heavy drinking as undermining both mental and physical good health and frame alcohol consumption as incompatible with long-term goals and active lifestyles. Burgess et al. (2022) present similar findings on the pressures young people in the UK experience to be successful, linking declines in youth drinking and a rise in 'conscious moderation' to individualisation and pressure to 'hustle' against a backdrop of anxiety for the future, while Törrönen et al. (2021) highlight how young people in Sweden see alcohol as a 'destructive force' impacting on physical and mental health. Other cultural changes that suggest ambivalence towards alcohol and a privileging of moderation or abstinence include the rise of temporary abstinence initiatives. These induce drinkers to take a break from drinking to promote health and productivity, encouraging reflection on drinking and a return to (more thoughtful, moderate and reflective) consumption after a stint of sobriety (Robert, 2022). This is echoed across emerging online communities which promote 'mindful' consumption and link this to wider discourses around self-improvement (Nicholls, 2021). This emphasis on more mindful drinking moves away from an addiction model that positions alcoholism as a disease managed only through abstinence; the focus is on so-called 'normal' drinkers who are encouraged to reflect upon and change their drinking behaviours. The intention is to develop a sustainable long-term relationship with alcohol – the ideal future becomes one in which alcohol is consumed in moderation.

Alongside these changes, a market of NoLo drinks is developing (Corfe et al., 2020). These products mimic alcohol in taste, appearance and branding, with several leading alcohol brands now offering a NoLo alternative. While a proliferation of choice around these products may be welcome, they also represent a means for the industry to encourage *new* forms of consumption through 'addition marketing' featuring NoLos being drunk on top of alcohol and in novel settings (Miller et al., 2022) and promote their wider brand, as NoLo products are subjected to fewer marketing restrictions than their alcoholic counterparts (Purves and Critchlow, 2021).

Research suggests that, despite retaining a small share of overall alcohol sales, NoLo and 'light' products are purchased by both drinkers and non-drinkers (Davey, 2022) and have contributed to a reduction in the total alcohol purchased by British households (Anderson et al., 2020). Voluntary sector organisations dedicated to reducing alcohol-related harm are starting to promote NoLos (Alcohol Change, n.d.), and there has been a policy move towards encouraging their consumption, with the UK government pledging to work alongside the industry to increase NoLo availability and 'nudge the general drinking population towards lower strength alternatives' (HM Government, 2019: 43). Despite these developments, there is a lack of understanding around how NoLos are used. Further research is required to interrogate the ways in which NoLo usage complements consumers' wider (non)drinking practices and aids the construction of particular (non)drinking identities. Such work can enhance our wider understandings of how the 'neoliberal paradox' (Lupton, 2018) is managed, asking how current consumption practices feed into specific types of imagined futures (Suckert, 2022). This article considers

these questions, drawing on primary research to highlight the ways in which contemporary consumer practices may be used to construct the moderate, responsible and future-focused consumer under neoliberalism.

Methods

This article draws on data collected as part of a study funded by the Institute of Alcohol Studies to explore how NoLo products are marketed and used (Nicholls, 2022). Fifteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were undertaken with UK-based NoLo drinkers alongside analysis of NoLo marketing materials; this article will focus on findings from the interview component. Participants were recruited through social media and via local online groups. Post viewers and community members were encouraged to share posts within their own social networks to aid recruitment. Inclusion criteria included ‘has drunk NoLo products at least three times within the previous six months’, and the study included both drinkers and non-drinkers. ‘NoLo’ was not strictly defined but was universally interpreted by participants as alcohol-free products or those with a very low ABV (less than 1%); ‘lighter’ beers or lower strength wines were *not* defined as NoLos by any participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of York, and all participants gave fully informed written consent, had the right to withdraw and were given information about support organisations via the participant information sheet. Alcohol use could be a sensitive topic, but participants talked openly about their drinking histories and their experiences of NoLos. This may have been aided by my own positionality; as a non-drinker at the time of the research and fellow NoLo consumer, this helped me to build rapport with participants.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 1 hour were conducted online in 2021, audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews used open questions and prompts to explore participants’ (non)drinking biographies and histories and any changing relationships with alcohol, alongside their reasons for drinking NoLos and how they used them. An initial topic guide was designed, adopting a narrative approach that asked participants to ‘tell me about your relationship with alcohol across your life so far’ before moving on to consider the role of NoLos more specifically. Ideas for the topic guide were also drawn from my previous interview guides (created both individually and in collaboration with others) that have proven effective in my research on drinking and sobriety. The data were transcribed, coded and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), with some expected themes building on the earlier analysis of marketing materials but others arising more organically from the interview data (Joffe, 2012). While my own positionality as a NoLo drinker and – at the time – non-drinker may have affected my interpretation of the data, I would argue my own position in personally appreciating NoLos but retaining some scepticism towards the role of the industry in promoting them allowed me to consider both the potential merits and concerns around the expanding NoLo market.

Seven participants identified as male and eight as female, and nine identified as middle-class and three as working-class (three did not identify with a class). Nine identified as ‘drinkers’ (including one as a ‘low-level drinker’ and one as a ‘moderating drinker’) and six as ‘former drinkers’ (sober between 1 month and 4 years). While relationships with alcohol can be fluid, at the time of the research:

Three participants were ‘short-term non-drinkers’ who identified as ‘drinkers’ but were taking a fixed-term break from consuming alcohol (e.g. due to pregnancy or a ‘health kick’). They were exclusively consuming NoLos but planned to drink alcohol (and NoLos) in the future.

Six could be defined as ‘hybrid drinkers’ who consumed both alcohol and NoLos and wanted to maintain these drinking practices into the future.

Of the six former drinkers, two explicitly identified a desire to remain sober indefinitely and consume *only* NoLos, while the others were open to the possibility of adopting a hybrid model and resuming some (low-level) alcohol consumption in the future.

Findings

A number of themes emerged across the sample in relation to the motivations for NoLo consumption and the patterns around their usage. While there is a degree of overlap between these themes, they could broadly be divided into ‘choice’, ‘productivity’ and ‘health and futures’. Each will be outlined in turn below.

‘An active consumer’: choice and hybrid drinking

Almost all participants praised the ‘choice’ offered by an expanding NoLo market, and some stressed the importance of self-management in relation to (non)drinking practices:

I have appreciated having the products there for myself. I myself, am a consumer, an active consumer (Georgie, 22, hybrid).

It just helps people make a better-informed choice, I think. I feel like I can make a more informed choice (Liam, 26, hybrid).

These examples place responsibility on the individual in ways that echo the industry’s calls to ‘drink responsibly’. While previous research suggests this tagline may be met with scepticism or framed as ‘meaningless’ by drinkers (Gallage et al., 2020), it appears these messages *have* been internalised to some degree, as shown through the emphasis on being an ‘active consumer’ who makes ‘informed choices’. The parroting of such messages from the industry may also represent a way to position the self as a ‘responsible’ drinker in contrast to the ‘irresponsible’ practices of others. There was *some* consideration of the wider cultures in which consumption takes place or the broader social changes (such as education) which might help to reduce societal alcohol consumption, but emphasis was mostly placed on individual responsibility, echoing demands under neoliberalism to make informed, active and ‘good’ individual choices around substance use while structural issues are downplayed (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2020). This is echoed in the data by Pete (38, short-term non-drinker), who stresses that consumers can very much ‘make your own choices’ *but*, at the same time, ‘have to’ remain mindful of the *consequences* of those choices in relation to alcohol

consumption. Others stressed the importance of ‘limits’ and ‘responsibilities’. Against this backdrop, the expanding market was presented as a positive development, responding to consumers’ needs and supporting them to make the ‘right’ choices. NoLos also enable consumers to continue to engage with the market, and several participants talked with enthusiasm about investing in new products. At the same time, ‘choice’ is not equally available to all; participants acknowledged that accessing NoLo products can be expensive and time-consuming (e.g. requiring them to bulk-buy products on specialist websites).

Notions of ‘choice’ were discussed extensively by the drinkers, who valued the flexibility of a mixed economy of alcohol and NoLos. Several talked about adopting a ‘hybrid’ model where NoLos could support more moderate drinking overall (Davey, 2022). For example, Alice (32, short-term non-drinker) suggested it is possible to ‘mix it up’, alternating between NoLos and alcohol in different drinking sessions, while a few participants used the term ‘hybrid’ to describe their (non)drinking practices. While co-consumption of NoLos and alcohol in a single drinking session was rare, several described alternating between alcohol and NoLos across a typical week. Strategies included consuming alcohol at the weekend but NoLos on weeknights or drinking alcohol in pubs but NoLos at home. In this way, overall weekly alcohol consumption could be reduced or restricted to particular contexts:

What I’ll probably maintain for quite a while is not drinking [alcohol] at home, just when I go out. I mean I’ll have one [alcoholic] beer, and then go home, or have one beer with a meal. I just like having the options to do that, because if I just restrict myself to alcohol-free, then you go out and it’s like, I want to have a beer, but they might just have one [alcohol-free] option . . . So, that form of consumption suits me really well. I know I’m drinking at a level I’m comfortable with, because it’s, literally, one or two a week at most (Liam, 26, hybrid).

Liam describes the flexibility NoLos offer, suggesting NoLo consumption at home supports him in placing boundaries around this drinking and establishing a ‘level I’m comfortable with’. It is also noteworthy that Liam twice emphasises his ability to have just the ‘one’ beer, thus positioning himself as a ‘moderate’, responsible drinker (Melia et al., 2021). Liam also describes this hybrid approach as something he is going to ‘maintain for quite a while’, thus explicitly positioning his current consumption levels as sustainable and long term. Similarly, Pete (38, short-term non-drinker) talked about ‘hybridity’ and ‘balance’ while Ed described a hybrid model as one that helps him to achieve that ‘happy medium’ in his relationship with alcohol:

It is finding that sort of happy medium. I do enjoy drinking and . . . [cut] . . . I still think that alcohol has got a place, but alcohol-free booze helps me manage that a lot better because it can be quite easy to go, ‘Oh, I haven’t been drinking that much’, but then you think to yourself, ‘Oh, but the last five weekends in a row, I have been out’ . . . [cut] . . . It can . . . not get out of control, but your use can increase without you really realising it . . . something about it that just suddenly creeps up on you, and you realise you have been drinking too much or whatever. So I think that alcohol-free drinks definitely have got a massive role to manage that – I think a hybrid type of model works quite well for me (Ed, 42, hybrid).

Like Liam, Ed works to position himself here as a responsible drinker. This can be seen in the way he stresses this is *not* about drinking ‘getting out of control’ but rather about how consumption *could* ‘creep up’ if left unmonitored. In both examples, the notion of actively maintaining particular (non)drinking practices is prominent, suggesting a mindful, deliberate process of regulating consumption that was echoed by others who talked about ‘taking control’ (Zara, 42, former drinker) of their consumption. Again, the unspoken implication here is that these so-called ‘responsible’ drinking practices can be justified, in contrast to the practices of those who *do* allow their consumption to ‘creep up’ or become excessive (Piacentini et al., 2012). While hybrid approaches were common among drinkers, there was a tendency among the non-drinkers to advocate for exclusive consumption of NoLos and to argue that – for them – drinking in ‘moderation’ or a ‘hybrid’ fashion was not sustainable or achievable.

‘No time for a hangover’: NoLo consumption and productivity

Alongside their role in promoting more moderate alcohol consumption, NoLos were valued due to both their similarity to *and* their difference from alcohol. On the one hand, they were regarded as products that ‘hit the spot’ (Liam, 26, hybrid) or offer ‘part of the experience’ (Pete, 38, short-term non-drinker) because they mimic the taste and appearance of alcohol. On the other, they were perceived as lacking some of the negative side effects of alcohol consumption. In this way, they might function as a ‘lifehack’:

I thought, ‘Hey, this could actually work out if it tastes nice. This could be a nice little life hack’ . . . Like cheating, life hack, similar kind of vein, because it felt like, ‘Hey, pretend you’re still drinking beer by drinking non-alcohol beer’ (Rob, 34, former drinker).

The idea of a ‘life hack’ suggests a shortcut to get ahead in life or even ‘cheat’ the system to be more efficient. While a very small number of participants did not reference ‘productivity’ as a motivator for NoLo consumption, most expressed similar sentiments, viewing NoLo consumption as something that could leave them feeling ‘sharper’ the day after drinking:

I know I’m not going to . . . [be] . . . feeling crap the next day because it hasn’t got any alcohol in it, but I still get that sense of having a drink or letting my hair down a bit. Even if it’s a weeknight and I’ve had a shit day, I’ll be like, ‘Well, I can have a Seedlip’ . . . and I still then get that feeling that you would with having a drink, like, relax, just let the day go (Emma, 31, hybrid).

Emma – and several others – felt NoLos could offer something of the immediate sense of pleasure or relief of alcohol, but with no risk of ‘feeling crap’ in the aftermath. NoLo consumption can be enjoyed ‘even’ on a weeknight, with the implication being that it need not impact upon the working week. However, Emma also discussed the value of drinking NoLos on a Friday or Saturday night, describing how this means rather than feel ‘exhausted’ over the weekend she can ‘go on a hike today or whatever’. Here, it is not

just the working week that must be used ‘productively’; leisure time must also be maximised through activities that require effort and energy (see Caluzzi et al., 2021a). Similarly, Hannah (30, former drinker) described how switching to NoLo consumption meant she had the ‘get up and go’ energy to exercise on a weekend morning. Again, the suggestion here is that a time traditionally associated with leisure (or rest and recovery after drinking) can be used in more productive ways. Hangovers were rarely discussed in relation to physically unpleasant sensations, but rather as something to be avoided as they impacted upon productivity. For example, Ed (42, hybrid) claimed he was increasingly unwilling to ‘waste time’ by spending a day hungover, while Alice (32, short-term non-drinker) expressed her reluctance to ‘have a write-off day’ after drinking.

The need to ‘maximise’ both work and leisure time was exemplified by youngest participant Georgie; as someone who ran her own business alongside full-time paid employment, she articulated – like Hannah – her own need to ‘get up and go’. In this way, she embodies the contemporary ‘hustle culture’ that Burgess et al. (2022) argue restricts young people’s alcohol consumption, demonstrating the blurring between work and leisure time discussed in previous research (Caluzzi et al., 2021a):

I literally work every weekend with the business. So, I know that I do not have time to have a hangover. I need to be up at 6:30, like get up and go (Georgie, 22, hybrid).

Some participants also switched to NoLos for short periods during the run-up to a specific event, life change or personal challenge. For example, runner Christiaan (41, hybrid) talked about switching to NoLo consumption exclusively in the run-up to a marathon to optimise recovery, training and performance (see Törrönen et al., 2021). Throughout these examples and others, emphasis was placed on using time productively and/or maximising performance in some way (whether at work, through leisure or through developing the capacity of the body).

‘Thinking about the future’: healthism and a ‘future focus’

While literal concerns with ‘tomorrow’ shaped participants’ NoLo consumption as they sought to avoid hangovers and maximise productivity, discussions of the medium- and long-term future were also apparent, as evidenced by Christiaan’s reflection on the process of choosing a NoLo:

You made that conscious choice to not drink and it makes you feel proud, as in, hey, I’m not just living in the moment . . . It makes you feel like you’re planning ahead and you’re conscious of what is coming tomorrow . . . [cut] . . . If you just drink, drink, drink, you’re not worrying about tomorrow, which is nice once in a while, but maybe not when you’re 45 (Christiaan, 41, hybrid).

‘Living in the moment’ – drinking alcohol without thinking about the consequences – is associated with youth and a lack of responsibilities, while ‘thinking about tomorrow’ (through consciously choosing a NoLo) is a mature choice associated with the responsibilities of adulthood. Here, ‘not worrying about tomorrow’ functions as a way of describing

the heavy (younger) drinker who is depicted as being less concerned with their future more broadly, although this is of course challenged by recent research (Burgess et al., 2022). Christiaan went on to reflect on NoLo consumption as a process of actively ‘thinking about the future’ and ‘being smarter than everybody else’. Others linked NoLo consumption to wider processes of self-development, as shown through Rob’s (34, former drinker) claim that drinking NoLos helps him to ‘be a better version of myself’. The emphasis is on making a ‘smart’ and future-focused choice; the immediate pleasure of alcohol is foregone in favour of the *delayed* and future gratification of planning ahead or becoming a ‘better’ person.

NoLo consumption was also felt to bring longer-term benefits in relation to physical and mental health, particularly when adopted as part of a more ‘moderate’ overall relationship with alcohol (although once again, the non-drinkers promoted exclusive NoLo use as the means by which to ensure these health benefits). Physical health had become more of a priority as participants aged, with several mentioning they had become ‘increasingly aware of health issues’ (Jacqueline, 68, hybrid) linked to drinking. While such observations around the links between (non)drinking and physical health have been noted among younger people (Caluzzi et al., 2021a), this suggests such concerns may also be relevant for older consumers, perhaps as midlife (and beyond) comes with increasing pressure to ‘age well’ (Peel et al., 2004). Notions of the future self are particularly salient here, as shown through Ed’s imagining of a future in which he does *not* successfully show restraint and control:

You only get one body, don’t you? You really have to look after it as much as you can. I just don’t want to be that guy who is 50, pulling a massive beer gut around, and struggling with knees and all that sort of stuff. Yes, if I view the future, that is not really what I want to see, so that is a big reason for managing drinking a bit as well . . . [cut] . . . If you get yourself into quite an unhealthy state, it takes such a colossal turnaround . . . trying to lose weight and lifestyle changes, the whole lot? I just think it is easier to head stuff off at the pass and keep everything moderate and keep yourself healthy (Ed, 42, hybrid).

Here, the heavy-drinking body is depicted as ‘struggling’, perhaps even as ‘failing’ or ‘grotesque’ (Lupton, 2018) (as implied through the image of ‘pulling a massive beer gut around’ and in other participants’ descriptions of the drinking body as ‘bloated’, uncomfortable or ‘disgusting’). The drinking body is ‘out of control’; this might be the case quite literally when intoxicated (Fry, 2011), but such framings also describe the bloated, overweight, struggling body of the heavy drinker more generally. This of course undermines the notion of the controlled enterprising self who makes the ‘right’ lifestyle choices to maximise future quality of life (Rose, 1998); under neoliberal regimes, the fat body represents a literal embodiment of ‘failure’ (Spratt, 2023).

Ed’s concerns about the type of body his future self might inhabit clearly shape his present practices; his vision of an ‘unhealthy’ future and ‘struggling’ body have become a ‘big reason’ for incorporating NoLos into his (non)drinking regimes. This is apparent in his suggestion that one should ‘head stuff off at the pass’ through moderation and making ‘healthy’ choices before it is ‘too late’. Such findings echo those of Cairns and Johnston (2015) who, in research on food consumption, noted an anxiety among

participants to secure ‘healthy futures’ through making the ‘correct’ dietary choices in contexts shaped by the demands of neoliberalism and healthism. Ed’s point that ‘you only have one body’ also implies individuals must avoid becoming a burden on health providers; there are no magic ‘fixes’ to be offered by medicine, and it is the responsibility of the individual to ‘make the most’ of their one body. This echoes discourses of healthism that position health as a form of ‘secular salvation’ whereby ‘this one-and-only life [or body] becomes everything’ (Crawford, 2006: 404), and measures must be taken to ensure the ‘good life’ in the absence of an afterlife. Other participants also stressed how NoLo consumption had ‘spiral’ effects that helped them to make other ‘healthy’ choices – such as stopping smoking or eating less fast food – that might facilitate ‘healthier’ futures and be framed as contributing to weight loss and minimising future risk (in relation to lung disease or cancer). As these examples show, making the ‘right’ choices about consumption in the present was clearly framed as a way to be or become a better, smarter or healthier person, and this could be done through drawing on specific types of imagined futures that might be embraced (smart and forward-thinking) or avoided (struggling and unhealthy).

Discussion and conclusion

Against the backdrop of an expanding market of NoLo products, this article has demonstrated how individuals are able to construct viable subjectivities as light, hybrid, moderate or non-drinkers. NoLo consumption provides a lens through which consumers can frame (non)drinking choices as ways to ensure ‘healthy’ futures by drawing on notions of choice, productivity and health. A clear alignment with the individualised goals of neoliberalism also allows NoLo consumers to present their decision to drink less – or not at all – as a personal choice aligned with self-development rather than as a ‘moral stance’ or critique of the wider dominant drinking culture.

Notions of choice are central to the wider construction of the neoliberal consumer-citizen (Cairns and Johnston, 2015), and consumer choice was a central preoccupation for participants. The expanding NoLo market was framed as a positive development supporting consumers to make ‘informed’ choices as we are increasingly compelled to engage in ‘active choice-making’ around drinking rather than simply consuming without reflection (Caluzzi et al., 2021b: 886). In this way, NoLo consumption could be situated against a neoliberal backdrop with the individual consumer at the centre, emphasising the privileging of choice and responsibility in relation to substance use (Atkinson and Sumnall, 2020). These messages are echoed in contemporary temporary abstinence initiatives and mindful drinking movements (which frequently compel individuals to take responsibility for managing, reflecting on and making changes to their drinking practices) and in the industry’s ‘drink responsibly’ messages.

Choices to consume NoLos were also tied to productivity, most explicitly in the avoidance of the ‘wasted’ time that might follow drinking. While previous research has outlined the ways in which rituals around the hangover play a role in maintaining friendships through ‘collective suffering’ (Griffin et al., 2018), NoLo drinkers actively sought to avoid hangovers (primarily because they might ‘write off’ time that could otherwise be employed more effectively). A focus on getting ahead and being more productive was noted across

the whole sample, suggesting that Burgess et al.'s (2022) findings around how 'hustle culture' restricts young people's alcohol consumption may also be applicable to older drinkers; pressures to construct the enterprising self likely cut across generations.

NoLo consumption is also entangled with discourses of healthism. As Caluzzi et al. (2021a) argue, this increasingly pervasive discourse is likely to be contributing to declining drinking rates, with 'health' an important factor in shaping people's decisions to drink lightly or abstain (Pavlidis et al., 2019). NoLo consumption was framed as a healthy choice and the embodiment of self-control in a context where 'health' itself becomes a means through which to demonstrate restraint, in contrast to the excess of the 'unhealthy Other' (Crawford, 2006: 414). Such imperatives can be firmly situated within the prevailing cultural climate of neoliberalism as the rolling back of the welfare state means responsibility for health is increasingly transferred to the individual (Spratt, 2023). Health has become a 'supervalue' (Crawford, 2006); an all-encompassing term whereby the pursuit of health becomes synonymous with 'the good life'. Such trends have also been identified by the alcohol industry through marketing targeting drinkers who are 'focused on health and wellness' (Myles et al., 2022: 2). This includes promoting products as low calorie, 'lighter' or rich in vitamins, with these often seen as healthier options by consumers (Chrysochou, 2014).

The increased availability and range of NoLos was also framed by drinkers in the sample as supporting them to adopt more moderate drinking practices through embracing 'hybrid' approaches balancing the consumption of alcohol and NoLos. Similar findings are reported by Davey (2022) who suggests drinkers may sometimes choose NoLos instead of alcohol to help them drink more 'mindfully'. These strategies allow consumers to manage the 'neoliberal paradox', that is, the simultaneous need to demonstrate empowerment through consumption *and* to show restraint (Lupton, 2018). NoLos function as a tool to enable drinkers to 'do' moderation and construct identities as restrained, controlled and responsible consumers. In this way, a supposed form of 'non-consumption' (of alcohol) is reworked through alternative consumer practices that facilitate continued engagement with the market. Indeed, while a decision to refrain from consuming something – or even to simply consume *less* – might traditionally be read as 'deviant' in a consumer society (Cherrier and Gurrieri, 2013), such approaches fail to consider how supposed reduced or non-consumption may enable *new* modes of consumption, with substitute products such as NoLos facilitating novel consumption practices and identities. The consumption of NoLo alternatives thus allows both drinkers and non-drinkers to reposition non-drinking choices as firmly embedded within the market in a capitalist context.

Notions of imagined futures and the future self cut across the themes discussed. This can include consideration of short-term futures (e.g. seeking to feel energised and productive the day after drinking) but also the longer-term construction of the enterprising and successful self. The 'future' here was frequently conceptualised by participants in terms of what Brannen and Nilsen (2002) term 'adaptability', that is, as a set of possible 'risks', to health or productivity, for example, that need to be managed. Drawing on the work of Oomen et al. (2022), it is clear that individuals were participating in processes of 'futuring', whereby constructing ideas of one's future is socially performative, and these performances are a set of social practices that take place firmly in the present.

While Oomen et al. (2022) conceptualise this in relation to collective notions of ‘the future’, this approach can be adapted to consider the performative nature of individuals’ actions in constructing their own biographies. As Fry (2011) suggests, light drinkers and non-drinkers may also construct their practices as a conscious attempt to craft alternative subjectivities that link to their future selves and the ongoing ‘pursuit of desired identities’ (p. 354). In these ways, NoLo consumption can be framed as a ‘smart’ and future-focused choice as (some of) the short-term gratifying effects of alcohol are sacrificed in the interests of perceived longer-term benefits. This, of course, aligns neatly with neoliberal expectations around moderation, control and the need to balance the immediate gratification of consumption with the delayed pleasures of rationalisation within a neoliberal context (O’Malley and Valverde, 2004). Such actions work to ‘bring the future into the present’ (Oomen et al., 2022: 254) and allow (non)drinkers to argue that they are ‘thinking about the bigger picture’ (Fry, 2011: 361) rather than ‘living in the moment’. Both non-drinking and ‘moderate’ or hybrid drinking also enable NoLo consumers to imagine positive futures built around ‘ageing well’ (see Peel et al., 2004) and around self-development and ‘optimising’ the performance of the body or mind (see Nicholls, 2021).

It should be noted that the sample for this project was small and self-selecting, meaning findings may not be reflective of the experiences of all NoLo consumers and may capture the views of a group who were particularly keen to share their positive experiences. Recruitment methods likely compounded this middle-class bias, and the use of social media communities may have excluded ‘harder-to-reach’ populations. While recruitment did take place during the COVID-19 pandemic and this presented particular challenges, future research into NoLos could pro-actively seek more diverse samples. The middle-class bias in the sample also means these data may reflect the experiences of those most easily able to embrace the various demands of healthism, to imagine particular ‘futures’ and to access and purchase NoLo products. The degree of uniformity across the data is also noteworthy – while a very small number of participants drew *only* on other motivations for NoLo consumption (including preferring the taste and wishing to fit in/appease drinkers), a clear majority used notions of choice, productivity, health and/or the future to frame their practices, highlighting the extent to which these powerful messages around individual responsibility, healthism and productivity have been internalised by middle-class consumers. Furthermore, drinkers may have been working to actively construct socially desirable narratives about their own drinking in an interview setting, in contrast to the perceived ‘irresponsible’ consumption of others (Piacentini et al., 2012). Nonetheless, findings contribute to our understandings of the under-researched topic of NoLo use and have wider applicability. They develop the limited evidence base on how NoLos are used at a critical moment when these products are of potential interest to the government as a policy tool to decrease alcohol-related harm, and public health messaging might focus on encouraging ‘hybrid’ consumption models. This article also highlights some of the ways in which supposed practices of non-consumption may be replaced with alternative, conscious consumption practices. These are clearly situated against a backdrop of neoliberalism and individualisation that privileges consumer choice, constraint, moderation, productivity, healthism and an orientation towards the future (an awareness that one’s consumption choices in the *now* may affect one’s body or lifestyle and health in the future). Similar findings may be observed among other

traditional (non)consumers, for example, in the shift towards substitute ‘meat’ products targeted at vegetarians/vegans or others engaging in restrictive dietary practices that might traditionally limit choice. Findings also contribute to our understandings of how future subjectivities and identities – both short and long term – are imagined, an area that remains neglected in sociological research (France et al., 2019). As Suckert (2022) argues, consideration of consumers’ ‘imagined futures’ (in relation to NoLo consumption but also more widely) tells us much about present social practices and the ways in which they are framed, negotiated and justified.

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Data availability statement

The data have not been uploaded to a public repository and are not publicly accessible.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the University of York Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS) in June 2021. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation in the study.

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