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No- and Low-Alcohol Beverages and the Italian Aperitivo: Cultural Boundaries or New Market Opportunities?

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Abstract:

This study investigates the integration of no- and low-alcohol (NoLo) beverages into the traditional Italian aperitivo ritual, a practice deeply rooted in Italian culture and traditionally associated with alcoholic drinks. This exploratory research aims to understand whether the NoLo trend, driven by increasing health consciousness and mindful drinking habits, can find acceptance within this strong cultural framework or if cultural barriers will limit its diffusion. The study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate consumer attitudes toward NoLo alternatives in the Italian aperitivo, drawing on insights from focus groups conducted with both Italian and international participants. The results suggest that, while the Italian aperitivo remains deeply linked to traditional alcoholic beverages, younger consumers, particularly Generation Z, show a greater inclination toward health-conscious drinking and express positive attitudes towards NoLo options. By exploring the viability and cultural implications of introducing NoLo alternatives into the Italian aperitivo context, the research identifies critical success factors for NoLo adoption in Italian aperitivo rituals: preserving the experiential aspects of aperitivo, developing culturally sensitive branding, and positioning NoLo beverages not as substitutes but as legitimate extensions of the traditional alcoholic beverages. This paper challenges the binary substitution model and introduces a context-dependent framework for understanding adoption behaviour, helpful for segmentation in marketing theory.

Purpose

This study investigates the integration of no- and low-alcohol (NoLo) beverages into the traditional Italian aperitivo ritual, a practice deeply rooted in Italian culture and traditionally associated with alcoholic drinks. This exploratory research aims to understand whether the NoLo trend, driven by increasing health consciousness and mindful drinking habits, can find acceptance within this strong cultural framework or if cultural barriers will limit its diffusion.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative approach to investigate consumer attitudes toward NoLo alternatives in the Italian aperitivo, drawing on insights from focus groups conducted with both Italian and international participants.

Findings

The results suggest that, while the Italian aperitivo remains deeply linked to traditional alcoholic beverages, younger consumers, particularly Generation Z, show a greater inclination toward health-conscious drinking and express positive attitudes towards NoLo options.

Research limitations/implications

By exploring the viability and cultural implications of introducing NoLo alternatives into the Italian aperitivo context, the research identifies critical success factors for NoLo adoption in Italian aperitivo rituals: preserving the experiential aspects of aperitivo, developing culturally sensitive branding, and positioning NoLo beverages not as substitutes but as legitimate extensions of the traditional alcoholic beverages.

Originality/Value

This paper challenges the binary substitution model and introduces a context-dependent framework for understanding adoption behaviour, helpful for segmentation in marketing theory.

Keywords: Experiential Marketing, Leisure, Innovation and Tradition, no- and low (NoLo) alcohol.

Paper type: Explorative empirical paper

1. Introduction:

The beverage industry is undergoing a profound transformation shaped by evolving consumer preferences, technological innovations, and shifting cultural practices. One of the most significant tendencies in recent years is the rise of the no- and low-alcohol (NoLo) trend. NoLo products are beverages that contain little to no alcohol, typically defined as having an alcohol by volume (ABV) of up to 1.2% for low-alcohol and 0.0% for no-alcohol options (Anderson et al., 2021). These products aim to replicate the taste, appearance, and social function of traditional alcoholic drinks while offering an alternative to consumers seeking reduced alcohol intake. NoLo products span multiple categories, including beers, wines, spirits, and cocktails, where the ethanol content has been significantly reduced or entirely removed (Innova Market Insights, 2024). The NoLo trend reflects a growing desire for healthier, more mindful drinking options, driven by greater awareness of wellness, shifting social norms, and a broader cultural push toward moderation (Anderson et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b, Gambero Rosso, 2024c; Irizar, 2022; Nicholls, 2023). These dynamics are especially manifest among younger generations, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, whose preferences are reshaping global alcohol markets (Gambero Rosso, 2024a, 2024b; Kokole et al., 2021).

The NoLo trend is challenging traditional drinking habits and, by extension, culturally embedded rituals such as the Italian aperitivo. The aperitivo is more than a beverage occasion. It is a social institution that serves as a transitional moment between day and evening, work and leisure (Aperol, 2025). It is a deeply embedded social ritual in Italian culture, reflecting broader Mediterranean values such as conviviality, quality of life, and intergenerational bonding. Rooted in ancient Roman traditions of the “gustatio,” the modern form emerged in the late 18th century with the invention of vermouth in Turin. By the 20th century, the ritual had become a symbolic social bridge between work and leisure, practiced widely in urban and rural contexts alike.

Over the past decade, the aperitivo market in Italy has experienced notable growth, driven by a resurgence in traditional social practices and a global appreciation for Italian culture. Nearly 22 million people participate in this habit, marking a 31% increase compared to 2011. Additionally, 43% of Italians go out for aperitivo at least once a week, while others prefer hosting it at home, a trend that grew during lockdowns and remains popular (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2024). Over the years, the ritual of aperitivo has gained international popularity, influencing consumption patterns both domestically and abroad. This period has also seen the rise of iconic aperitivo beverages, such as the Aperol Spritz, which has become synonymous with summer and social gatherings.

While regional variations—from Venice’s cicchetti to Milan’s buffet-style spreads—demonstrate the aperitivo’s adaptive cultural nature (Montanari, 2017), this ritual is still strongly associated with alcoholic beverages such as wine and bitters. Therefore, integrating NoLo options into this context may pose challenges related to perceived authenticity, acceptance, and customers’ expectations. For this reason, the study aims to explore consumer perceptions and attitudes toward no-low alcohol (NoLo) beverages in the context of the Italian aperitivo, investigating whether and how alcohol-free alternatives can be integrated into this cultural tradition. The study examines the factors influencing the acceptance of NoLo options among both Italian and international consumers currently living in Italy. By considering both Italian and international consumers, the research allows for a more nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges in marketing no-low

alcohol in the aperitivo experience. Indeed, the aperitivo tradition, while deeply rooted in Italy, has found resonance in various international contexts, with international consumers increasingly interested in this experience (Cawood, 2024; Montanari, 2017). By addressing the intersection of tradition and innovation in the aperitivo context, this research provides insights for businesses involved in the aperitivo experience seeking to innovate within the evolving beverage market.

2. Part 1: Method

2.1 Methodology and Data Collection:

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore consumer perceptions and attitudes toward NoLo beverages within the culturally significant ritual of the Italian aperitivo. Given the complex, socially embedded nature of drinking behaviors and traditions, a qualitative approach was deemed suitable to capture rich, nuanced insights. Focus groups were selected as the primary method for data collection, allowing for dynamic and interactive discussion among participants, which in turn facilitated a deeper understanding of both individual and shared experiences.

To explore consumers' potential reactions to NoLo alternatives into the Italian aperitivo, two separate focus groups were conducted: one with Italian participants and one with international participants living in Italy. This distinction was essential to explore the cultural variances in perception and ensure an open, comfortable environment for participants to share their thoughts without influence from differing norms. The focus group discussions were semi-structured, guided by a flexible discussion outline developed in alignment with the research objectives. This structure ensured that key topics were consistently addressed while still allowing room for organic interaction, leading to the discovery of spontaneous insights. The cross-cultural comparative format enabled the study to explore how the acceptance of NoLo beverages varies depending on local traditions, social expectations, and lifestyle preferences.

Participants were recruited through a Google Forms-based screening questionnaire. The selection aimed to ensure a diverse representation in terms of gender, age, occupation, and consumption habits. The Italian group consisted of 12 participants, while the international group included 10 participants. These group sizes were suitable for focus group methodology, allowing for meaningful interaction while avoiding overcrowding or domination by a few voices.

For both groups, basic demographic data were collected, including age, gender, length of stay in Italy (for international participants), frequency of alcohol consumption, and experience with the aperitivo tradition. This information was useful not only for descriptive statistics but also for contextualizing the responses during analysis.

Participants were assured that all data would be analyzed anonymously and that their voices, while recorded, would not be identifiable in any published results. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was held in a quiet, distraction-free environment conducive to discussion. Sessions were fully recorded using digital devices, and voice transcription was performed using the AI tool "Transkriptor." This allowed for accurate, speaker-attributed transcriptions, forming the foundation for further coding and thematic analysis.

The discussion guide included questions and prompts related to aperitivo habits, attitudes toward traditional alcoholic and NoLo beverages, social and cultural influences, health consciousness, and marketing perceptions. While all participants responded to the same

core topics, the flexible format enabled follow-up questions based on participants' unique perspectives.

2.2 Data Analysis

The data gathered from the two focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method particularly suited for identifying recurring patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns or themes within qualitative data, and it can be flexible to different research questions and types of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach has been already adopted in previous studies about moderating alcohol consumption (Irizar et al., 2022) and it seems particularly suitable for exploratory studies on sensitive topics. Our thematic analysis was conducted following the systematic guidance provided by ATLAS.ti (2025), a qualitative research tool designed for data visualization, network diagram creation, literature reviews, and the coding and analysis of field notes and transcripts. This approach involved a structured six-step process:

1. *Familiarization with the Data:* Initially, we thoroughly reviewed the focus group data, allowing us to develop a comprehensive understanding of the content and context. This preliminary review ensured our familiarity with the material prior to analysis.
2. *Generating Initial Codes:* We systematically coded the data, identifying segments of the transcriptions relevant to our research questions. Each meaningful unit was assigned a code directly aligned with the research objectives.
3. *Searching for Themes:* After coding, we grouped the codes into potential themes, organizing them based on their similarities and relevance to the research objectives. This process enabled us to capture key ideas emerging from the data, considering both recurring and unique patterns.
4. *Reviewing Themes:* We then reviewed the identified themes, ensuring their coherence, internal consistency, and sufficient evidential support within the data. This stage involved refining the themes to maintain their distinctiveness.
5. *Defining and Naming Themes:* Once finalized, each theme was clearly defined and named, effectively encapsulating its essence and facilitating reference in the final analysis.
6. *Writing the Conclusion and Creating a Visual Thematic Map:* Finally, we synthesized our findings into a coherent narrative. Each theme was described in detail, supported by direct quotes from participants, and interpreted in relation to the research questions. This step also involved the creation of a visual thematic map to effectively summarize the findings.

In the next section, we summarize the process followed in the thematic analysis of the two focus groups. The researcher began by thoroughly reviewing the audio recordings and the resulting transcriptions. This initial step enabled an immersive understanding of the content and helped identify early trends and differences across the two cultural contexts. Each transcript was systematically coded to capture relevant ideas, attitudes, and behaviors. Codes were applied to both individual words and longer phrases that held thematic importance. The goal was to develop a set of codes that reflected recurring ideas, including

substitution vs. addition, cultural perceptions, health motivations, and brand communication. Next, codes were clustered into potential themes. For example, comments about tradition, resistance to change, and ritualistic behavior were grouped under a "Cultural Resistance" theme. Meanwhile, discussions highlighting health, wellness, and experimentation with mocktails contributed to the "Health-Conscious Innovation" theme. Themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the data. Overlapping or redundant themes were merged, and minor themes were either consolidated or discarded. The validity of each theme was assessed through cross-checking with the original transcripts to confirm consistency and support. Each theme was clearly defined and named to encapsulate its meaning concisely. For instance, one prominent theme was titled "Addition over Substitution," highlighting the finding that NoLo beverages are more accepted when framed as new options rather than as replacements. The final step involved integrating the themes into the broader research narrative. Illustrative quotes were selected to support each theme and enrich the interpretation. For example, one Italian participant remarked, "A non-alcoholic spritz just feels fake—it's not what aperitivo is about," reflecting resistance to substitution. Conversely, an international participant commented, "I like mocktails—it's a fun and healthy way to socialize," pointing to a more open attitude. This thematic analysis provided a detailed understanding of how cultural context influences consumer acceptance of NoLo beverages, and it results in the development of two visual thematic maps which are reported in the results section.

3 Part 2: Results

3.1 Italian Focus Group

Participants in the Italian focus group emphasized the deep cultural roots of the aperitivo tradition. This was commonly associated with relaxation, conviviality, and social rituals tied closely to alcohol consumption. Many participants highlighted that the aperitivo is less about the specific beverage and more about the social experience. However, traditional alcoholic drinks like Aperol Spritz or Campari Soda were considered integral to the ritual, with several respondents suggesting that the absence of alcohol could diminish the authenticity of the experience.

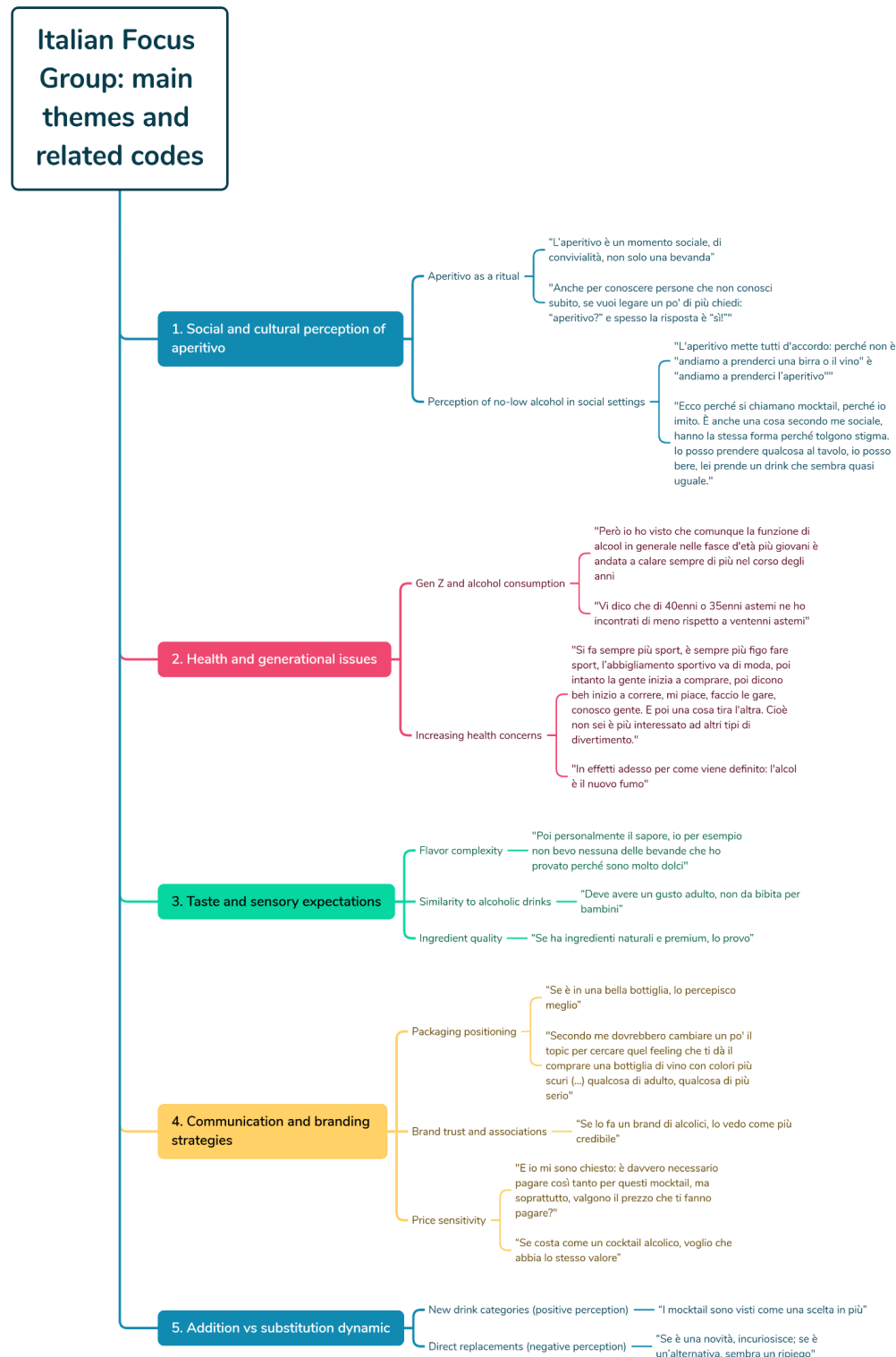
The thematic analysis of the Italian Focus Group also suggests the presence of a generational gap in health awareness. Older participants were less likely to prioritize health considerations in their aperitivo choices. Younger participants, particularly those in their 20s and 30s, expressed growing interest in healthy lifestyles and were more receptive to NoLo beverages. Still, even among health-conscious youths, the idea of substituting traditional drinks entirely was met with resistance. Rather, participants preferred having NoLo options available alongside traditional ones.

One of the main issues for acceptance of NoLo alternatives was related to "taste and Sensory Expectations". Taste was a major concern for all Italian participants. There was skepticism about whether NoLo beverages could replicate the complex and satisfying taste of alcoholic drinks. Many participants stated that their past experiences with NoLo alternatives were disappointing due to weak flavor, poor texture, or overly sweet profiles. These sensory expectations seem to be a significant barrier to acceptance, especially among those who identified as traditionalists or habitual consumers of specific aperitivo drinks. Italian participants also criticized the marketing of NoLo beverages, often describing the messaging as either too health-oriented or disconnected from the aperitivo's social and

emotional values. Instead, there was support for a more inclusive, lifestyle-oriented communication strategy that positioned NoLo options as complementary to traditional offerings. Brands that could evoke heritage while promoting innovation were seen as more trustworthy.

A major insight from the Italian group was the rejection of the substitution model. Participants showed greater openness to NoLo drinks framed as *additions* rather than *replacements*. This subtle distinction aligns with the cultural framing of the aperitivo as an enriched, not constrained, experience. Participants preferred a flexible ritual where NoLo beverages could coexist with alcoholic options without compromising tradition.

Figure 1 – Italian focus group thematic map: main themes and related codes



Source: authors' elaboration

3.2 International Focus Group

International participants expressed less attachment to alcohol as a necessary component of socializing. Some participants noted that in their home countries, particularly in

Northern Europe and North America, moderation and alcohol-free options were becoming normalized. Many felt comfortable ordering mocktails or non-alcoholic beers, especially in health-conscious or professional settings. This openness provided a stark contrast to the more rigid Italian view of alcohol's role in the aperitivo.

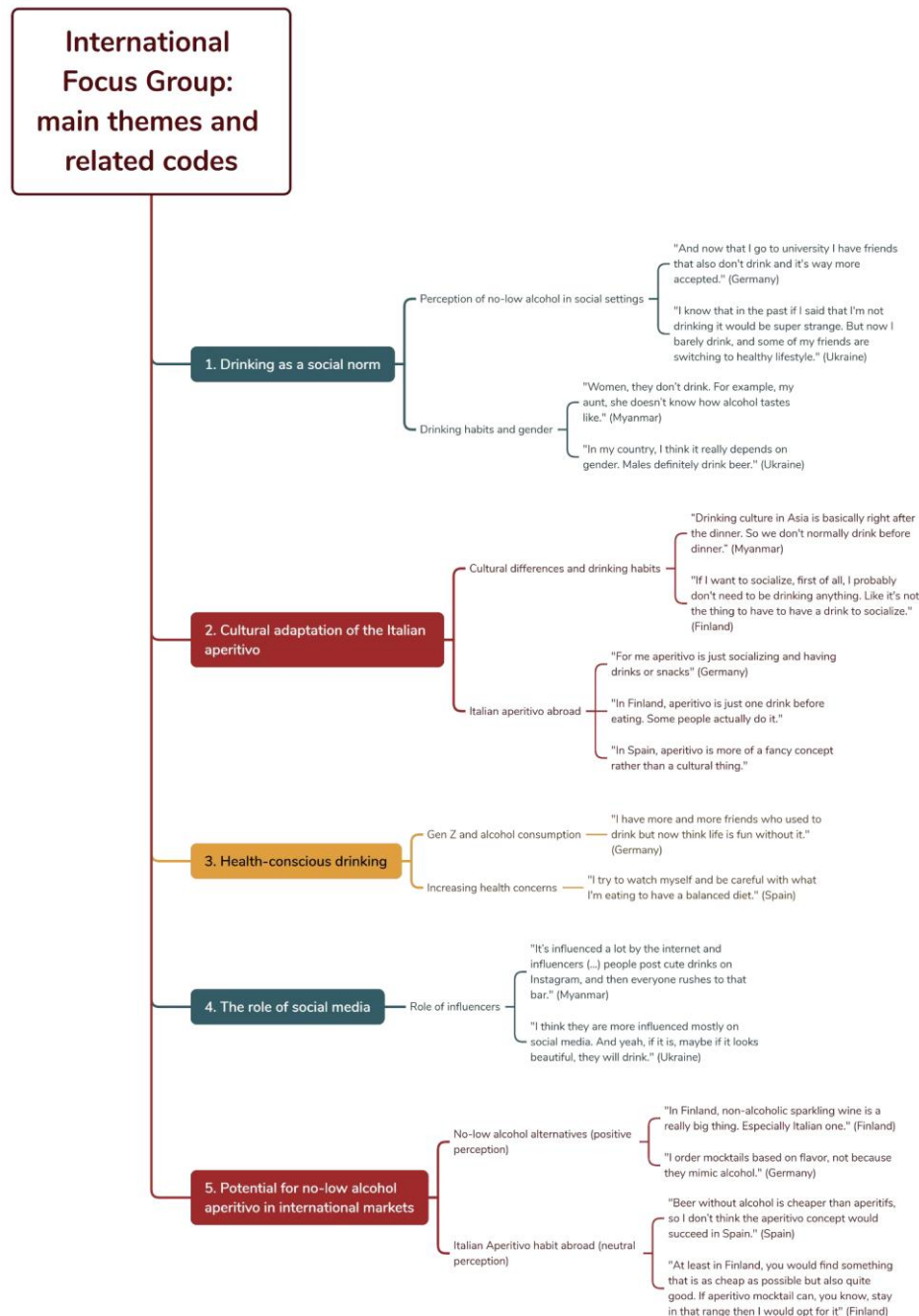
Despite a lack of familiarity with the aperitivo before moving to Italy, many international participants had adopted and adapted the ritual into their own routines. They viewed it more as a relaxing or trendy moment than a culturally sacred one. This allowed them to embrace NoLo alternatives more freely, often experimenting with local ingredients or creating their own variations at home.

In relation to attitudes towards health-conscious drinking, participants repeatedly cited health as a primary reason for consuming NoLo beverages. Some had reduced their alcohol intake due to fitness goals, medical concerns, or mental health awareness. These motivations made them enthusiastic about innovations in the NoLo sector, including botanical spirits, non-alcoholic wines, and adaptogenic drinks. Taste, while important, was often secondary to well-being and self-control.

Another distinction emerges from the comparison between Italian and international participants. Unlike the Italian group, international participants mentioned social media as a major influence in discovering NoLo products and aperitivo ideas. Instagram and TikTok were popular sources for recipes, product recommendations, and lifestyle content. This reflects a digital-native approach to drink consumption, where social proof and aesthetic appeal are essential drivers of trial and adoption.

Among international participants there was strong agreement that the concept of aperitivo, especially when paired with NoLo beverages, had substantial potential outside Italy. Participants believed that global consumers would respond positively to a social ritual that promotes moderation, sophistication, and relaxation. In markets where drinking culture is evolving, the Italian aperitivo—reimagined with NoLo options—could serve as a trendsetting model.

Figure 2 – International focus group thematic map: main themes and related codes



Source: authors' elaboration

4 Part 3: Conclusion

Most existing literature on the no/low alcohol (NoLo) trend focuses on global markets or general health/wellness perspectives. This thesis applies the trend specifically to the culturally entrenched Italian aperitivo, examining whether a shift toward NoLo beverages is possible or even desirable within such a traditional framework. This exploratory study suggests that while NoLo drinks have made substantial inroads in global beverage markets, their integration into the aperitivo culture in Italy remains more tentative. Through the qualitative insights gathered from two focus groups, several culturally grounded themes

emerged that highlight both the potential and the limitations for NoLo beverages in this context. In particular, the results suggest significant cultural and generational differences in the acceptance of NoLo beverages within the aperitivo context. Italian participants emphasized tradition, taste, and resistance to substitution, favoring a gradual integration of NoLo options. International participants were more open to innovation, driven by health trends and digital engagement. These insights suggest that NoLo beverage strategies must be culturally nuanced and segment-specific to succeed in diverse markets.

The Italian focus group responses consistently pointed to the strong cultural and social dimensions of the aperitivo ritual. Participants emphasized the importance of taste, tradition, and sensory experience as central to their enjoyment of aperitivo, with alcoholic beverages seen as almost inseparable from the ritual. While some participants, especially younger ones, expressed openness to exploring alternatives, these were primarily framed as occasional substitutions or enhancements, rather than replacements for traditional alcoholic options. This suggests that in Italy, NoLo beverages are more likely to gain acceptance if positioned as premium or complementary offerings rather than substitutes.

In contrast, the international focus group revealed a more opened and favorable attitude toward NoLo options. In particular, participants from Northern European countries, where health consciousness and moderation are increasingly mainstream, were more familiar with and receptive to NoLo beverages. Some even associated Italian NoLo products with prestige and quality, citing examples such as non-alcoholic Italian sparkling wine. However, despite this openness, also participants in the international focus group still regarded the Italian aperitivo as a unique cultural experience where alcohol plays a symbolic role. Their uncertainty about incorporating NoLo options into this ritual underscores the complex interplay between innovation and tradition.

Another significant factor emerging from the research was the role of social media and influencers in shaping drinking behaviors. The aesthetic appeal of drinks — their "Instagrammability" — was cited as a motivator for choosing NoLo options. This suggests an opportunity for NoLo brands to leverage visual storytelling and digital channels to build appeal, especially among younger audiences.

The comparative analysis of the focus groups suggests that while international consumers may be opened for NoLo adoption due to health trends and evolving norms, the Italian market presents unique cultural barriers. Success in Italy hinges on a brand's ability to preserve the authentic aperitivo experience while offering innovative, high-quality alternatives that meet the sensory and emotional expectations of consumers. Messaging around craftsmanship, origin, and taste sophistication will be key to resonating with this audience.

This paper challenges the conventional binary substitution model, which assumes that consumers either fully replace alcoholic beverages with no- and low-alcohol (NoLo) alternatives or reject them entirely. Instead, it introduces a context-dependent framework that recognizes the fluidity and multiplicity of consumption choices based on situational, social, and emotional factors. Consumers may integrate NoLo products into their routines not as permanent replacements, but as complementary options chosen according to occasion, mood, health concerns, or social setting. This more flexible model reflects multi-modal consumption behaviors, where individuals dynamically shift between alcoholic and non-alcoholic products without a fixed identity as "drinkers" or "non-drinkers." Such a framework offers valuable implications for market segmentation, as it enables firms to

target emerging consumer micro-groups—such as the health-conscious weekday abstainer or the social weekend drinker—with tailored messaging, product formats, and brand experiences that resonate with their diverse lifestyle patterns.

Several limitations of the research must be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a qualitative methodology using focus groups, which, while rich in insight, are not generalizable to the broader population. The small sample sizes and potential self-selection bias — as participants with pre-existing interest in aperitivo were more likely to participate — may have influenced the findings. Additionally, social desirability bias and group dynamics could have shaped responses, particularly in discussions where dominant voices may have steered the conversation. These limitations are inherent to qualitative research and highlight the need for further validation using quantitative methods, such as surveys or experimental designs.

Cross-cultural aspects also posed challenges. Differences in communication styles and cultural expectations may have affected how participants from different countries articulated their views, potentially leading to under- or over-representation of certain themes. Despite efforts to ensure diverse representation across gender, occupation, and drinking habits, the focus group setting may not have fully captured the spectrum of perspectives relevant to NoLo adoption.

To address these constraints, the study employed strategies such as structured discussion guides, moderator facilitation to balance participation, and explicit disclosure of data use to ensure informed consent and confidentiality. These measures aimed to enhance the reliability of the data while respecting ethical standards.

In summary, this study confirms that NoLo beverages hold promise within the Italian aperitivo landscape, but their success will depend on nuanced, culturally attuned marketing and product strategies. While international markets appear more readily accepting of NoLo innovations, the Italian context demands a more sensitive approach that honors tradition while introducing change. Future research should broaden the scope with larger, representative samples and mixed methods to deepen understanding of consumer behavior in this evolving space.

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