# Understanding the “sober curious” consumer



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For many previous generations, young adulthood was a time in which they could sow some wild oats – and that often meant partying with friends, drinking a fair amount of alcohol, and then suffering the consequences the next day. But for today’s younger generations, this rite of passage is not as common.

In fact, alcohol avoidance is a rising trend worldwide, led by Generation Z, with as many as one in three of these young consumers saying they never drink alcohol.[1] This trend spells big opportunity in the beverage sector.

While moderating alcohol consumption is evident across all age groups, it doesn’t necessarily mean that the majority of people are abstaining completely from alcohol. That said, many people are now taking a more mindful approach toward alcohol consumption. This attitude has given rise to what has been coined as the “sober curious” movement, and it is having a tremendous impact on the types of beverages we consume, while driving new beverage product development.

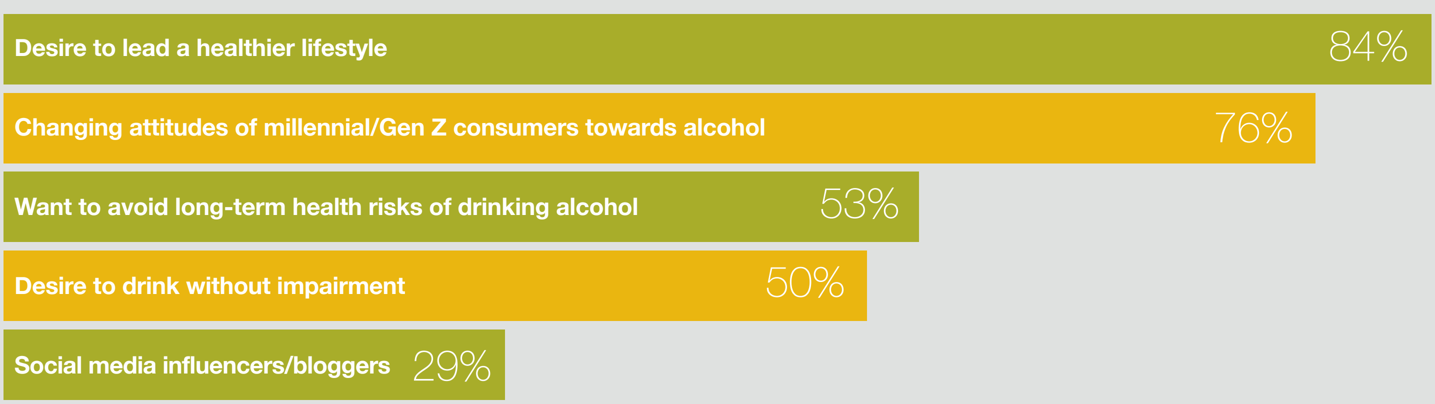
By definition, “sober curious” is a social wellness movement in which people are choosing to opt out of alcohol consumption – at least sometimes.[2] The concept advocates that people look at their relationship with alcohol, along with the health benefits of drinking less.

The movement was on the rise prior to COVID-19, and after a short pandemic-induced rise in alcohol consumption, sober curiosity has resumed its pre-pandemic relevance, according to insights from The Hartman Group’s Sober Curious Report.[3]

For most people, health is at the root of their sober-curious tendencies. As consumers have become more informed about the impact of the foods and beverages they consume on health and long-term wellness, alcohol consumption has seen increasing scrutiny. And it’s no wonder. Although prevailing thought has been that minimal drinking (for example, a single glass of red wine per day) was actually beneficial for health, there is a rising body of evidence that now suggests no amount of consumption is good. For example, a 2018 study in *The Lancet* found that moderate drinking may protect against heart disease, but it raises the risk of cancer and other diseases, so the risks outweigh the benefits.[4]

## Consumers across all age groups are dialing back their alcohol intake for a variety of reasons.

### Key factors driving the rise of low/no-alcohol drinks




Source: Euromonitor International. “Alcoholic Drinks: Global Industry Overview.” June 2021.



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Beyond the quest for health and wellness, other factors have also helped propel sober curiosity, ranging from how we now think about ourselves and relationships with others; to finding new ways to socialize where alcohol avoidance is more accepted; to the growing demand for food and drink that caters to specific preferences.[5]

As we observed, young consumers are at the forefront of these emerging ideas. Euromonitor data noted that more than three in four young consumers (millennials and Gen Z) now say they have changed their attitudes about alcohol, which has prompted the emergence of concepts like "Dry January," sober social clubs and changing bar scenes.

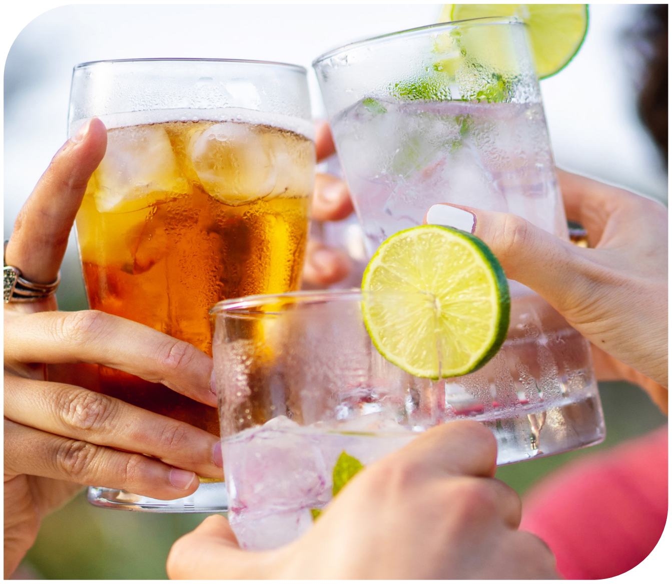
At the same time, these young adults do not seem inclined to turn away from the taste or sophistication of wine, beer and spirits.[6]

## Reimagining a category

All of this has given rise to a whole new category of adult-oriented beverages with low or no alcohol, with 4% of the beers and spirits launched in 2021 globally containing no alcohol, according to data from Innova.[7] Newly developed low-alcohol beverages are also seeing growth, with beverages like hard seltzers — boasting a healthier image, with only about 4% alcohol, plus fewer carbs and calories — reaching sales of $8.8 billion in the U.S. in 2021.[8]

These attitudes are also changing the landscape in a number of other beverage sub-categories, including a reimagination of non-alcoholic craft beer, alcohol-free wine, and zero-proof spirits, according to the Hartman report.

Consumers now also have an expectation that products in the low- and no-alcohol category will feature the now-mainstream better-for-you standards, such as lower sugar, added function, sustainable ingredients and ethical production. Data from FMCG Gurus suggests that rising numbers of consumers (4 in 10) say they regularly check the nutritional labeling of non-alcoholic drinks, with 59% noting they scrutinize sugar content in the beverages they purchase. [9]







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This is prompting additional innovation to expand beyond traditional alcohol categories into other better-for-you beverages, such as mixers and spritzers that are lower in sugar, contain trending botanical ingredients and offer specific health functions, with ingredients like adaptogenic herbs. There’s also been a rise in traditionally healthy non-alcoholic beverages that now feature low alcohol content, such as kombucha and coffee.[10]

As with many food and beverage categories going through this better-for-you disruption, brands will have to be conscious about ingredient sourcing and make the most of their nutritional labeling, according to insights from FMCG Gurus. Marketers will also need to position products to align with this rising desire for more mindful and functional alcohol consumption.

According to Hartman analysts, kombuchas, hard seltzers, coffees and other hybrid formats that offer both low alcohol and specific functions will have increasing appeal and offer strong opportunities in the near term, attracting new demographic groups like women and consumers who seek personalized options.

Whether or not beverages contain alcohol may become less relevant as products that offer both wellness and excitement – with innovative flavors and functional benefits – gain momentum for the growing audience of mindful consumers.

Make mindful consumption more delightful with **Cargill sugar reduction solutions**.

[1] Innova Market Insights. “Gen Z Drive Demand for Alcohol Reduction.” November 23, 2021. https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/gen-z-drive-demand-for-alcohol-reduction/

[2] Appleton, T. “A Clear-Headed Look at the Sober Curious Movement.” The Food Institute. April 12, 2022. https://foodinstitute.com/focus/a-clear-headed-look-at-the-sober-curious-movement/

[3] The Hartman Group. “Trend Spotlight: Sober Curious.” 2021. https://www.hartman-group.com/documents/1848515017/trend-spotlight-sober-curious?r=574322929

[4] GBD 2016 Alcohol Collaborator. “Alcohol Use and Burden for 195 Countries, 1990-2016: A Systematic Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016.” The Lancet. August 23, 2018. 392(10152); P1015-1035. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31310-2/fulltext#%20

[5] Ibid. The Hartman Group.

[6] Ibid. Innova Market Insights.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Grandview Research. “Hard Seltzer Market Size, Share and Trend Analysis Report by ABV Content, by Distribution Channel, by Region and Segment Forecasts, 2022-2030.” https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/hard-seltzer-market

[9] FMCG Gurus. “Functional Thirst: Non-Alcoholic Beverage Consumption in 2022.” May 25th, 2022. https://fmcggurus.com/blog/fmcg-gurus-functional-thirst-non-alcoholic-beverage-consumption/

[10] Ibid. The Hartman Group.



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