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Young adults are drinking less often

A new industry analysis says moderation, lower-alcohol products and mixed drinking habits are reshaping alcohol culture in major markets.

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Young adults are not abandoning alcohol so much as changing how they drink, according to a new industry analysis that says the strongest trend in major markets is moderation, not a wholesale retreat.

The report, compiled from data by IWSR, NielsenIQ, the World Health Organization and national health agencies, argues that people of legal drinking age through their mid-30s are still participating in alcohol culture, but with more selective habits, more interest in lower-alcohol products and more willingness to switch between alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks in the same night. In IWSR's top 15 beverage alcohol markets, the share of Gen Z legal-drinking-age consumers who said they had consumed alcohol in the previous six months rose from 66% in 2023 to 73% in 2025.

That increase sits alongside clear signs of moderation in several mature markets. In Canada, the share of adults ages 18 to 34 who said they had not drunk alcohol in the previous year rose from 12% in 2015 to 23% in 2024. In England, 24% of adults said they had not drunk alcohol in the previous 12 months in 2024, the highest level since 2011. In the United States, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism said 47.5% of people ages 18 to 25 reported drinking in the past month in 2024, a reminder that drinking remains common even as patterns shift.

The report's central argument is that these trends are not contradictory. Younger consumers are still buying alcohol, but they are doing so less routinely and with more attention to occasion, price and format. The old model of frequent, high-volume drinking is losing ground to what the report describes as occasion-led and moderation-compatible demand.

That shift has helped fuel growth in ready-to-drink beverages, no- and low-alcohol products, lighter serves and functional drinks that sit close to alcohol but do not always contain it. IWSR expects the combined no- and low-alcohol market in key countries to grow at a 4% annual rate through 2028, led by no-alcohol products at 7%. It also said no-alcohol analogues grew 9% in 2025 and functional drinks grew 11%.

Ready-to-drink products remain one of the clearest beneficiaries. IWSR projects RTDs will rise from 2% of total beverage alcohol servings in key markets in 2019 to 4% by 2029. In the United States, supplier sales of spirits-based RTDs reached $3.3 billion in 2024, up 16.5%, according to the Distilled Spirits Council.

The reasons younger adults are drinking less often are consistent across regions: health concerns, self-control, affordability pressures and convenience. NielsenIQ found that in Asia-Pacific, 30% of consumers were drinking less than a year earlier while only 15% were drinking more. Among those cutting back, 41% cited health and 25% cited financial pressure. In China, health was cited by 52%.

The report also points to a behavior known as zebra striping, in which people alternate alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks over the course of an evening or week. That pattern has become commercially important because it suggests many younger consumers are not rejecting alcohol entirely; they are trying to control intake without giving up social rituals.

Regional differences remain sharp. North America shows some of the clearest movement toward moderation paired with premium RTDs and nonalcoholic options. Latin America still has relatively high participation rates, but younger consumers there are shifting toward premium beer, flavored RTDs and alcohol-free beer. Europe remains heavily alcoholic by global standards, but no- and low-alcohol products have moved into the mainstream. In Germany, a reassessment published this year found that 21.1% of adults were non-drinkers.

In Asia-Pacific, the picture is mixed but commercially dynamic. Japan’s per-adult alcohol intake has fallen steadily over decades. South Korea’s RTD market has expanded rapidly since 2020. China’s producers are adapting baijiu for younger drinkers through cocktails and lower-alcohol expressions. India is seeing both moderation signals and strong premiumization at the same time.

The report says beverage companies can no longer rely on a single growth strategy built around more volume from traditional beer, wine or spirits occasions. Instead, it argues for portfolios that combine premium alcohol for selected occasions with no- and low-alcohol alternatives for everyday use or mixed social settings.

For policymakers, it says the lesson is different but related: younger consumers respond to price, packaging, peer norms and access rules. That means stronger age verification online and at retail points of sale, clearer warning labels where justified and support for credible lower-risk substitutes may be more effective than treating youth

drinking as a simple yes-or-no issue.

The broader conclusion is that young adults are not walking away from alcohol culture altogether. They are walking away from heavy routine drinking and toward products that fit tighter budgets, health goals and more flexible social lives.