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# AVAILABILITY CONDITIONS AS A CRITICAL FACTOR IN PRODUCT CATEGORY MANAGEMENT IN SHAPING THE OFFER OF NON-ALCOHOLIC EQUIVALENTS OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Anna KAMIŃSKA[1], Przemysław DMOWSKI[2*], Ewa MARJAŃSKA[3]

[1] Gdynia Maritime University, Faculty of Management and Quality Science; a.kaminska@sd.umg.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0003-1759-3175
[2] Gdynia Maritime University, Faculty of Management and Quality Science; p.dmowski@wznj.umg.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-7774-3692
[3] Gdansk University of Technology, Faculty of Management and Economics; ewam@zie.pg.gda.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0001-5180-4306
* Correspondence author

**Purpose:** To determine the availability of non-alcoholic wines and spirit substitutes in various distribution channels and understand the factors shaping store assortments to identify potential product strategies in category management.
**Design/methodology/approach**: A literature review using desk research and a two-part study on the availability of non-alcoholic substitutes, utilizing observation and interview methods.
**Findings:** The highest availability of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages is in large-format stores, while the lowest is in small-format stores. Based on the analysis of the conditions for shaping the assortment of these products, it can be concluded that when shaping the offer, representatives of selected stores apply specific strategies towards this group of products, including competitiveness of the offer or size of the assortment.
**Research limitations/implications**: A limitation of the research is the relatively short implementation time and the subjective nature of the responses of store employees, which may result in an incomplete picture of reality. For a more complete verification of the results, it is advisable to conduct the survey on a larger sample.
**Practical implications:** The results can guide organizations that want to increase flexibility by introducing a more comprehensive range of non-alcoholic beverages.
**Social implications:** The analysis can also be used to identify priorities for manufacturers and retailers in the context of managing this product category, and can be used by companies in the implementation of ESG (Environment, Social, Governance) areas related to responsible consumption and promoting safety.
**Originality/value:** Defining product category management strategies in this emerging market can enhance a company's competitiveness in non-alcoholic beverage equivalents.
**Keywords:** non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages, product availability, product range development, product category management.
**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Effective product category management is one way for a company to improve its product sourcing strategy, and thus, consolidating sourcing activities within a specific product category rather than a brand for increasing profits. Skillful product category management also considers customer satisfaction, which plays an essential role in the era of ongoing changes in the behavior and attitudes of modern consumers. In the context of these challenges, accessibility issues understood as the possibility for consumers to purchase a specific product in a specific location, play a key role in creating and delivering the values expected by potential buyers. In accordance with generally accepted assumptions of product category management, low availability of given products may encourage consumers to look for other alternative products, or in the worst-case scenario for the company, completely discourage them from choosing a given product and taking advantage of the competition's offer. The intriguing part is that the issues of product availability for many companies are an indispensable element of the marketing mix, also called 5P marketing, which helps to determine and develop the best marketing tactics to identify and meet market needs (Yandug et al., 2023). As part of product category management, a company can implement various strategies for its products, including the offer's competitiveness or the assortment's size. In this context, consideration of the above issues is critical in the case of new, developing markets, where limited availability may constitute a potential purchase barrier for consumers.

An example of a market with huge development potential in Poland and worldwide is the market for non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages[1,2]. Its development is mainly related to changes in alcohol consumption trends. Therefore, more and more partially or entirely alcohol-free products have appeared on store shelves (ZPPP - Browary Polskie, 2022; Kokole et al., 2022; Anderson, Kokole, 2023). Currently, non-alcoholic beers, wines[3], and drinks that are an alternative to spirits are available on the market.

The dynamic development of this market segment poses new challenges for the industry, especially for sellers of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages, in terms of product category management. An unexplored area - but essential from this process's point of view- are the conditions shaping the range of these products on the Polish market. Therefore, the article aims to determine the availability of non-alcoholic wines and substitutes for high proof alcoholic beverages in selected distribution channels and to learn about the conditions

[1] In the current legal situation in Poland, according to the Act on Upbringing in Sobriety and Counteracting Alcoholism, a non-alcoholic equivalent of an alcoholic drink is considered to be a drink containing up to 0.5% vol. alcohol. Due to this definition, non-alcoholic drinks include both products completely free of alcohol, i.e., 0.0%, and containing it in a small amount (up to 0.5% alcohol by volume) (Kamińska, Dmowski, 2023).

[2] In this article, the term "non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages" is used by the authors interchangeably with the term "substitutes for alcoholic beverages".

[3] In this article, the terms "de-alcoholized wines" and "alcohol-free wines" are also used to refer to non-alcoholic wines.

influencing the formation of the assortment in stores in the context of challenges related to category management of this market segment.

## 2. The sector of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages in Poland compared to the EU and global markets

In Poland, alcohol categories have been the most significant part of the FMCG grocery basket for years. In 2020, they accounted for almost one-third of its value. During this period, Poles spent PLN 39.2 billion on alcohol, 7% higher than in 2019 (Wiadomości Handlowe, 2021). In turn, in 2021, Polish consumers' spending on alcohol amounted to PLN 40.2 billion (2.5% more compared to the previous year) (Fal, 2023), and two years later, in 2023, almost PLN 50 billion (Książek, 2024). According to data from 2016, Poles spend, on average, over 3.5% of their household budget on alcoholic beverages (Szafranowicz, 2019), which is a value close to the EU and global average (Table 1).

**Table 1.**
*Shares of expenditure on alcoholic beverages in households in various regions of the world in 2010-2014*

| Region | Region Share of spending on alcohol in households [%] |
|---|---|
| World | 3.46 |
| Eastern Europe | 5.87 |
| Western Europe | 3.88 |
| Asia | 4.29 |
| Australasia | 3.49 |
| North America | 1.94 |
| Latin America | 4.22 |
| Africa/Middle East | 2.49 |

Source: source: own study based on: Anderson et al. (2018).

It is worth emphasizing that there have been changes in the structure of global alcohol consumption in recent decades. Since the 1960s, there has been a decline in the share of wine in global alcohol consumption from 34% to 13%, with a simultaneous significant increase in the share of beer (from 28% to 36%) and spirits (from 38% to 51%) (Anderson et al., 2018). In Poland, alcohol consumption does not differ significantly from the global structure (Figure 1) (Klimkiewicz et al., 2021).

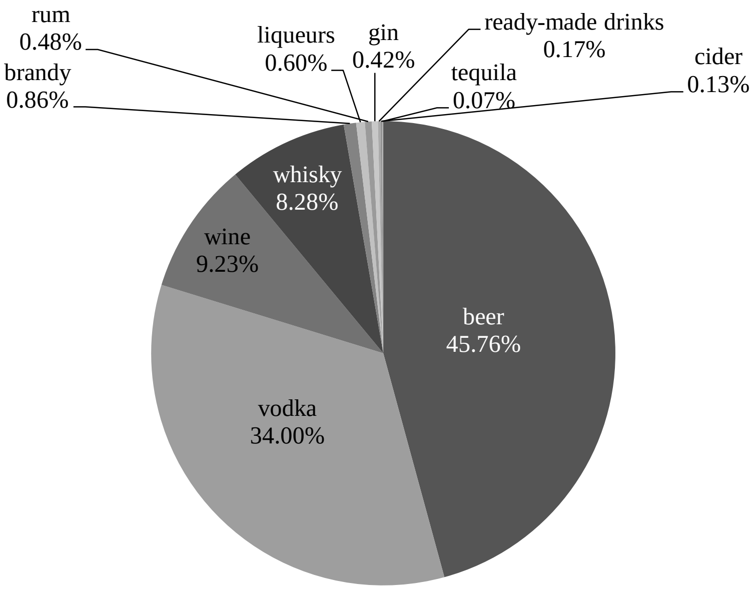


**Figure 1.** Share of individual product categories in the value of sales of alcoholic beverages in Poland in 2020.

Source: own study based on Klimkiewicz et al. (2021).

The largest share of sales in the market was recorded in the following categories: beer (value PLN 17.96 billion) and vodka (value PLN 13.35 billion), whose total market share was approximately 80%. The remaining 20% was allocated to other alcoholic beverages, which included wine and whiskey with a share of PLN 3.62 billion and PLN 3.25 billion in value terms, as well as brandy (value: PLN 338 million), liqueurs (value: PLN 236 million), rum (value: PLN 190 million), gin (value: PLN 165 million), ready-made drinks (value: PLN 64.9 million), cider (value: PLN 49.4 million), and tequila (value: PLN 27, PLN 3 million) (Bartoszewicz, Obłąkowska, 2021).

What is worth emphasizing are the changes in the structure of alcohol consumption in Poland. In recent years, there has been a clear trend of premiumization. This trend involves the increasing consumption of more expensive alcohols, often identified with higher quality (premium) products and guaranteeing a sense of belonging to a specific social group (Fal, 2023). The second significant trend is the increase in the consumption of substitutes for alcoholic beverages. The sale mainly includes non-alcoholic beers, sparkling wines, and non alcoholic drinks referring to spirits such as whiskey, gin, rum, or vodka. Of these products, the most popular and most readily available on the Polish market are beers.

In Poland, before 2016, the non-alcoholic beer segment practically did not exist; selected breweries offered customers single products from the non-alcoholic beer group, which were not wholly dealcoholized, usually containing up to 0.5% vol. alcohol (ZPPP – Browary Polskie, 2022). However, in 2017, there was a significant increase of as much as 22% in the value of the beer segment (Fal, 2020). Another significant, as much as 80% increase in the value and 85% increase in the sales volume of non-alcoholic beers was recorded in 2018. Among this group of products, the dominant position is held by beers from the 0.0% beer category. In 2020, 0.0% beers already accounted for 89% of the volume of the entire non-alcoholic beer segment, while in 2017, it was approximately 45%. Currently, 9 out of 10 beers sold are entirely alcohol-free. It is this product category that has contributed to the dynamic development of the non-alcoholic beer segment (zero percent segment) over the last five years (Figure 2) (ZPPP - Browary Polskie, 2022; Kompania Piwowarska, 2020; Fal, 2023; Jackowski, Trusek, 2018).

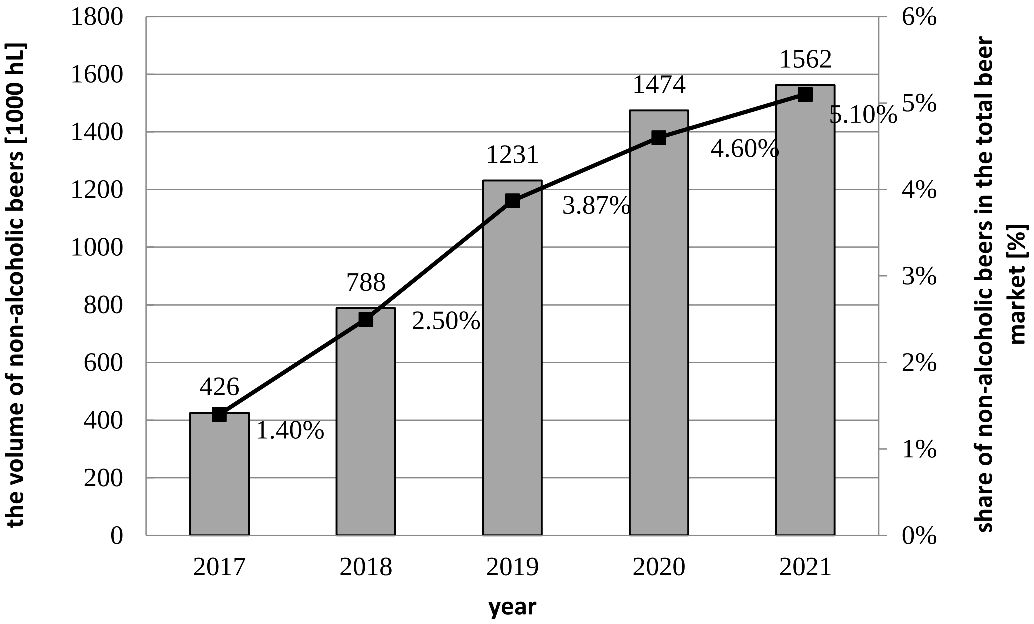


**Figure 2.** Increase in the volume of non-alcoholic beers and the share of non-alcoholic beers in the entire beer market in 2017-2021.

Source: own study based on Kompania Piwowarska (2020).

Alcohol-free beers are widely available, among others, in supermarkets and hypermarkets, as well as small-format and specialist stores. Currently, on the beer market, one can find not only 0% lagers, i.e., full-bodied lagers and flavored beers without alcohol, but also beer specialties such as non-alcoholic wheat beers, APA (American Pale Ale) or IPA (Indian Pale Ale) style beers.

Poland stands out in the non-alcoholic beverage market, ranking fourth in the EU in terms of non-alcoholic beer production, trailing only Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands (Kokole et al., 2022). These three countries account for nearly 75% of the EU's non-alcoholic beer production (Fal, 2023). In terms of exports, Poland is a global leader. In 2022, it was the fourth-largest exporter of non-alcoholic beer, with a value of USD 36.1 million, following the Netherlands ($166 million), Germany ($96.6 million), and Belgium ($44.4 million) (OEC, 2024).

Wines also have their non-alcoholic substitutes sold in Poland. The category of dealcoholized wines, similarly to beers, is developing at an equally dynamic pace. This segment records a double-digit increase in sales value year on year, reaching even more than 40%.

Dealcoholized wines, like their alcoholic counterparts, appear in a whole range of wine categories. Non-alcoholic red, white, pink, and sparkling wines are available on the market (Kinasiewicz, 2022). Sparkling wines are top-rated among consumers, with a 1178% increase in sales value recorded between August 2018 and August 2019 (Florencka, 2019). Equally high increases in sales value, although not as spectacular, were also recorded in subsequent years. From March 2021 to February 2022, there was another 64% increase in sales. Currently, this product category accounts for approximately 3% of the sales value in the non alcoholic wine segment (Górka, 2022). Undoubtedly, this product category's dynamic increase in sales value is due to the appearance of a dealcoholized version of sparkling wine - prosecco.

Producers in Poland are responding to changing consumer preferences by introducing non-alcoholic versions of high-proof alcoholic beverages (Mazurkiewicz, 2022). These alternative products, including non-alcoholic whisky, gin, rum, and vodka, are now available on the market. While these products are currently niche and lack comprehensive market statistics, their presence indicates a potential shift in the market.

The alcoholic beverage substitutes segment is developing dynamically and recording excellent sales results yearly. Growing consumer interest influences changes in the category management strategies used, which affects the increasing diversity of products offered by producers. Thus, to the customer's benefit, these activities result in expanding the store's assortment offer and increasing the availability of these products in individual distribution channels.

## 3. Research Methodology

In order to verify the current state of knowledge, an analysis of existing (secondary) data was carried out, including an analysis of content and available statistical data. By the methodology proposed by Bednarowska (2015), a cross-sectional analysis and comparison of historical data was carried out.

In a two-part study on the availability of substitutes for alcoholic beverages and its determinants, observation and interview methods were used (Lisiński, Szarucki, 2020). Interviews, as a method that allows for obtaining meaningful material documenting participants' experiences, knowledge, ideas, and impressions, should be combined with other data acquisition techniques, such as observation. This provides better-founded data and a more multilateral view of the situation (Glinka, Czakon, 2021).

Therefore, the research model included two main parts. In the first one, to determine the availability of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages, the hidden observation method, categorized by the photographic observation technique, was used. A research site was selected where it was possible to achieve the assumed goals. In this study, these were stores in the Tricity area offering non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages. The study on the availability of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages was carried out from December 2022 - March 2023. The Tricity market was selected for the study due to its size and structure. According to literature data, the Tricity agglomeration is highly saturated with retail space, mainly due to shopping malls with a wide range of various stores (Polish Council of Shopping Centers, 2023).

Seventy-five stores were selected to analyze the availability of products that are substitutes for alcoholic beverages, including 25 large-format stores, 25 small-format stores, and 25 specialist stores. Most surveyed stores belong to nationwide chains of stores with branches throughout Poland. These stores intend to offer the same range of products in each branch. Due to the size of the Tri-City market as well as the presence of stores belonging to the largest nationwide chains, it can be assumed that the Tri-City market reflects and is representative of the domestic market to a large extent. After selecting the retail outlets, further steps were taken for the observational study, such as perception, collection, and recording of the data obtained from the observation places using the photographic observation technique. Then, the obtained data were analyzed and interpreted, and appropriate conclusions were formulated. The availability analysis focused on determining the availability of non-alcoholic wines and substitutes for spirits. In contrast, non-alcoholic beers were omitted due to their widespread availability in all types of stores.

In the second part of the study, interviews were conducted with representatives of selected Tri-City specialist stores to identify the conditions for shaping the store assortment in managing the category of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages. Specialized stores were selected for the study because they are small-format stores (up to 300 sq m) that play an essential role in the sale of alcohol. In the long term, they are the most crucial distribution channel - they generate as much as 77% of the transactions and 67% of the sales value (Książek 2024). The study was conducted from November to December 2023. Sampling according to the criterion of homogeneous cases was used to identify potential study participants. Following Glinka and Czakon (2021), the study used an individual, direct, standardized, and semi-structured interview technique. An interview scenario was prepared, containing open questions regarding the reasons for introducing non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages to the assortment, factors shaping the offer, potential plans to expand the assortment, and noticeable barriers to purchasing this type of product. Then, after arranging an interview and obtaining the interviewees' consent to be recorded, the interviews were conducted and recorded using a recording device. The next stage of this part of the study included independent transcription of the respondents' statements to prepare material for further analysis. The analysis of the collected material consisted of coding the text event by event. It was decided to use this method because it was found to be consistent with our everyday perception of the obtained text, and it also allows for the comparison of events within one text and between the transcripts of different interviews. After initial coding, thematic analysis was performed, and data interpretation began (Glinka, Czakon, 2021).

## 4. Results and discussion

The market availability analysis has uncovered a total of 141 non-alcoholic wines. Among these, a significant 66% are completely dealcoholized wines, meaning they contain 0.0% alcohol. The remaining products, while described as alcohol-free, do contain a small amount of alcohol, up to 0.5% vol. It's worth noting that the majority of these products are imported, with a strong representation from European Union countries. This suggests a potential market trend towards non-alcoholic wines in these regions (Figure 3).

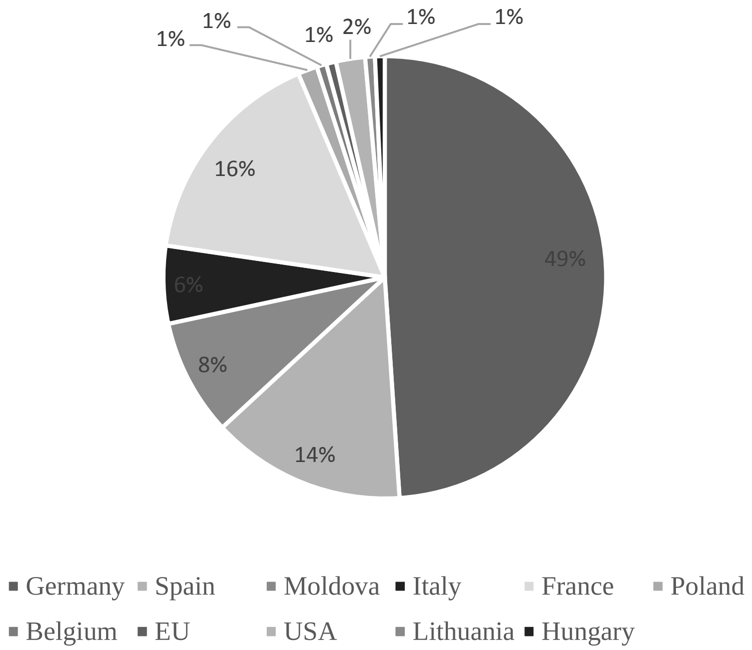


**Figure 3.** Percentage distribution of non-alcoholic wines by country of origin.

Source: own work.

Almost half of the identified products were produced in Germany, and many respondents included French and Spanish wines. Non-alcoholic wines are available on the Polish market in the entire spectrum of wine categories. The surveyed stores' assortment includes sparkling wines (30%) and still wines (70%). More than half of the tested products are white wines (56%), red wines constitute 29% of the identified goods, while the smallest group on the market is rosé wines (15%). Large-format stores have the highest availability of non-alcoholic wines, while small-format stores have the lowest availability.

**Table 2.**
*Availability of various types of non-alcoholic wines in particular types of stores*

| Type of non-alcoholic wine | large-scale | small-scale | specialized |
|---|---|---|---|
| **all types of wines** | **108** | **12** | **64** |
| calm | 78 (72.2%) | 7 (58.3%) | 42 (65.6%) |
| sparkling | 30 (27.8%) | 5 (41.7%) | 22 (34.4%) |
| white | 59 (54.6%) | 8 (66.7%) | 38 (59.4%) |
| red | 31 (28.7%) | 3 (25.0%) | 20 (31.3%) |
| rose | 18 (16.7%) | 1 (8.3%) | 6 (9.4%) |

Source: own work.

Analyzing the data obtained (Table 1), it should be stated that in each type of the surveyed stores, calm wines (non-fermenting in the bottle after closing) still dominate, constituting approximately 60-70% of the assortment. However, when analyzing the availability of wine color, the surveyed stores are dominated by white wines, which constitute from 55 to 67% of the assortment.

The data obtained are mainly consistent with the data obtained by Bonin and Czernecki (2021), who, in their research conducted on the capital market at the end of 2020, showed the highest availability of non-alcoholic wines in large-format and specialized stores, while the lowest in small-format stores. Then as of now, the market offers mainly non alcoholic, calm, white wines from Germany. Importantly, however, at that time (November-December 2020), a total of 73 different non-alcoholic wines were available in 60 different stores (Bonin, Czarnecki, 2021), which is almost half as many as the authors of this article identified on the market two years later (December 2022 - March 2023). This proves the continuous development of the segment of these products in Poland in recent years.

When assessing the state of the offer of non-alcoholic wines, it should be stated that the availability of non-alcoholic products is relatively high compared to that of their alcoholic counterparts. According to data posted on the polish Hurt & Detal website, customers can find about 30 variants of wine on store shelves in small-format stores and in larger stores (supermarkets or discount stores) up to 100 variants of various alcoholic wines (Książek, 2024).

In turn, when analyzing the availability of substitutes for spirits on the Polish market, only nine products were identified. More than half of the examined goods are non-alcoholic equivalents referring to the name of gin (56%), while 1/3 (33%) are whiskey substitutes (Table 2). Most analyzed products (89%) are drinks completely free of alcohol, i.e., 0.0%, imported mainly from EU countries such as Spain, Great Britain, Italy, and Belgium.

**Table 3.**
*Availability of various types of substitutes for spirits in particular types of stores*

| Product Type | Types of stores | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | large-scale | small-scale | specialized |
| **all types of substitutes for high-proof alcoholic beverages** | **5** | **1** | **7** |
| gin substitute | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| whisky substitute | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| rum substitute | 1 | 0 | 0 |

Source: own work.

In the case of substitutes for spirits, the highest availability is in specialist stores, and the lowest is in small-format stores, where only one product has been identified as an alternative to gin.

Additional information on the conditions for shaping the assortment in stores, in the context of category management of these products, including the product strategies used, was provided by a survey conducted by interviews among representatives of specialist stores.

According to the interviewees, the first substitutes for alcoholic beverages, equivalent to wines or spirits, appeared in most of these stores relatively recently, about 1.5-3 years ago; for some respondents, it was the beginning of their stores' operations on the market.

*We have been practically (...) on the market for three years, (...), so we have been practically from the very beginning because it was already a moment when non-alcoholic wines, obviously looking at the wines, had already been on the market for several years, so we have had wines on offer from the very beginning* [R5].

*Well, I think alcohol other than beer, I think about one and a half, two years ago* [R2].

Most interviewees point to the market need or the growing segment of non-alcoholic products as the reason for introducing non-alcoholic wines or other substitutes for alcoholic beverages.

*There is a market need; we did not have any in our assortment (...)* [R3].

*Market demand and the growing segment of non-alcoholic products* [R4].

Some respondents also indicated that introducing non-alcoholic products was to meet customer expectations, including specific consumer groups such as pregnant women, drivers, people who want to lead a healthy lifestyle, and women for whom non-alcoholic wine is a more exciting alternative than beer. For some respondents, an important reason was observing market or consumer trends and the desire to stay updated with these trends.

Referring to the factors determining the assortment in their stores, the interviewees pointed out that, to a large extent, the customer and his expectations are taken into account when shaping the offer. Some respondents respond to customers' needs and adjust the assortment to their needs in response to customers' questions about non-alcoholic products.

*(...) and I also see that if a customer wants something in the store and I see that there is one customer, a second, a third person, then it is in the store because I know that the customer needs it and I also meet this customer's needs (...)* [R1].

*If there is something that I do not have in my offer, and I know that it would be good for me to have at least one customer, we try to meet the expectations and organize such an assortment for the store* [R5].

The approach mentioned above is consistent with the product strategy called market segmentation strategy in the literature. According to this strategy, an individual buyer is considered a market segment, trying to consider his needs and requirements (Walas-Trębacz, 2002; Dietl, 1985).

In response to the question about the impact of the assortment available in large format stores, including large stores and hypermarkets, on creating the offer in their stores, some interviewees replied that they shape the assortment as an alternative to large-format stores.

*In my store, I try to have products that are not available in supermarkets. Because most of these non-alcoholic products are really of low quality* [R1].

*It seems that, on the contrary, we try to have products that are not there [in large-format stores (author's note)]* [R2].

In turn, this type of activity of specialist stores, which involves creating assortments in opposition to large-format stores, is consistent with the assumptions of a strategy that fills market niches and involves investing in market areas that competitors do not dominate. Such a strategy allows sellers to avoid competition and gives hope of achieving benefits with a significantly reduced operating risk (Walas-Trębacz, 2002; Mruk, Rutkowski, 1994).

However, some respondents claimed that a specific part of the assortment of non alcoholic wines in their store overlaps with the assortment of large-format stores because these are company stores belonging to a company that has its brands (or its producers) and supplies both specialist and large-format stores. This information is reflected in the market because, in the study on the availability of non-alcoholic wines carried out as part of this study, it was found that the assortment of specialist stores and large-format stores overlaps by approximately 50%, i.e., approximately half of the non-alcoholic wines available in specialist stores are also available in large-format stores. Moreover, all interviewees stated that they consider the latest market trends when creating their assortment.

*(…) Nowadays, you have to follow trends. Otherwise, you would be left behind* [R2].

*Regular market research is a crucial part of my role. I stay updated on market movements, monitor the offerings of my peers in other importing companies and specialist stores. This helps me stay ahead of the curve and make informed decisions* [R5].

During the conversations, some interviewees pointed to the trends currently observed in the alcohol market, including the growing 0% trend, the fashion for non-alcoholic products, the development of the natural wine trend, and wine collecting. Moreover, some interviewees emphasized the role of quality as an essential factor in shaping the assortment of their store.

*(…) I wanted to create a store with premium alcohol. Moreover, people buy less from me but of better quality, and therefore, these alcohols are more expensive* [R1].

*Quality is our top priority. We believe that non-alcoholic wine is a product that can either be excellent or disappointingly poor in quality. We always scrutinize the ingredients to ensure we offer the best to our customers* [R5].

This approach proves that stores use a product strategy to maintain the competitiveness of the offer, which requires that the products offered by the company be as good or even better than those offered by the competition. This, according to the assumptions of Walas-Trębacz (2002) and Mruk and Rutkowski (1994), means that the store must focus on all product features, especially on the quality and aspects of newness and modernity of the product. This attitude is also in line with the premiumization trend observed in recent years, which involves the increase in the popularity of more expensive and considered higher-quality alcoholic beverages (Fal, 2020). Moreover, the premiumization trend has significantly gained importance during the pandemic, especially in the alcohol category. This is partly because consumers are increasingly trying to recreate high-quality gastronomic experiences in the comfort of their own homes (Plata et al., 2022).

Some interviewees also mentioned their thoughts and experiences, the level of inflation, and the need to ensure product diversity in their offer, which are other factors influencing the development of the assortment.

When assessing their offer of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages, some respondents described their assortment as sufficient, possibly planning to introduce one new product or replace the existing one with a better one.

*What I have is enough, I think; maybe I will add one wine because recently we also got one sparkling white wine, which is very good. Maybe some non-alcoholic red wine. However, I think it is enough* [R1].

*Our perspective is that a diverse product range is crucial. As a company, we strive to stand out by offering superior products or by providing items of similar price but higher quality. We understand that if a product is not meeting consumer expectations, it's best to replace it with a more appealing option* [R4].

In terms of non-alcoholic wines, the market is well-stocked. We identified a total of 64 different products in specialist stores and a whopping 141 in all types of stores in the Tricity area. This wide availability across the wine category spectrum suggests that potential consumers won't face any purchase barriers. However, the situation is different for substitutes for spirits, with only 7 products found in specialist stores and 9 in all types of stores.

Some interlocutors indicated that they plan to expand the range of non-alcoholic equivalents by introducing new products, but sometimes, this is determined by the producers who supply the goods to the wholesalers. Introducing new products determines the competitiveness of the assortment offered, and optimizing this process is one of the instruments of product category management (Kłosiewicz-Górecka, 2018). This approach fits into the strategy of expanding products (offer) or the strategy of a new product, which involves the need to introduce new products to the offer to ensure high profit in a short period or the future (Walas-Trębacz, 2002; Mruk, Rutkowski, 1994).

When asked about the observed purchase barriers on the part of customers, most interviewees indicated that consumers of this type of product are determined to purchase and are aware of this choice. Therefore, they do not observe any barriers on their part, such as price or stereotypes. Some respondents mainly observed this attitude among young consumers.

*People consciously come for non-alcoholic wine* [R1].

*I mean, it seems that when it comes to price, once a person has already decided to buy a given non-alcoholic product, it probably does not make much difference for him (...) I think that even now, young people, I think that up to the age of 30, are not influenced by whether something is non-alcoholic or alcoholic. They are not influenced by the opinions of others who drink alcohol. Because it used to be so ingrained that if someone did not drink alcohol, they were some recluse or something, today, the youth is more developed, and there are no stereotypes such that one drinks non-alcoholic and the other alcoholic; I think they sit at the table together* [R2].

Some of the interlocutors, however, pointed to the observed barriers on the part of consumers, mentioning, among others, objections to products intended to be a substitute for vodka or the high price of these products. Some people also drew attention to the fact that these types of products are purchased only as a replacement for alcohol products and are forced by the need, e.g., pregnancy, driving, or taking medications permanently.

All respondents stated that there were no difficulties with the availability of these products in wholesalers. Moreover, some of the interlocutors also indicated that they had no difficulties because the company supplies its wholesalers itself and they have their brands.

*They are widely available, practically in every wholesaler. Accessibility is truly powerful. Virtually every product, rums, gins, and wine. There is a lot of it on the market* [R1].

*Availability is rather, from what I observe, they are constantly available* [R5].

*We do not have these difficulties because we supply our wholesalers* [R4].

Moreover, some claim that these products are widely available in wholesalers and that new products always appear.

Most interviewees indicated individual customers as the target market for their stores. Sometimes, this was because some stores did not have a license for the HoReCa segment, and some were company stores dedicated to individual customers.

*Only individuals in this store, because we do not have a license for HoReCa* [R3].

*We are a company store, so we are a branch strictly dedicated to retail customers* [R4].

Some respondents, however, indicated that due to the scale of orders, e.g., in the summer or holiday season, orders from representatives from the HoReCa sector predominate.

## 5. Summary and Conclusions

Product category management is primarily about understanding and identifying consumer needs. The research shows that when shaping the assortment, representatives of selected stores take into account customers' expectations and needs to a large extent. Some of 14 the store owners indicated that they planned to expand the assortment and introduce new products that are substitutes for alcoholic beverages, which may increase the assortment's competitiveness. Optimization of this process is one of the instruments used in product category management.

Hence, the article refers to the availability and shaping of the assortment of non alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages in selected distribution channels in managing this product category. The research shows that the highest availability of substitutes for alcoholic beverages occurs in large-format stores, while the lowest is in small-format stores. In the case of wines without alcohol, it was found that all types of stores surveyed offer these goods in significant quantities. A different situation occurs in the case of substitutes for spirits. Limited availability may encourage consumers to look for other alternative products and completely discourage them from choosing a given product. Moreover, this state of affairs may constitute a primary barrier to developing this market segment and a primary barrier to managing this category in the product sector.

From the conducted research, it can be concluded that when shaping the assortment of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages, representatives of selected stores apply specific strategies towards this group of products, including competitiveness of the offer or size of the assortment. This is important because, as part of product management, the company should develop effective strategies to maintain the offer's competitiveness, the optimal size of the assortment, and the inflow of new products, ensuring profit. Many companies owe their success and high market position to a well-prepared and implemented strategy for individual products.

The topics presented in the article are current and significantly evolving. According to the authors, this article may contribute to further discussion and research in managing the category of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages, mainly due to the dynamic development of this segment in recent years. Directions for further research include exploring the issue of the availability of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages from the consumers' point of view - whether the assortment offered by stores is sufficient in the opinion of consumers and whether customers are open to new products. The increasing willingness of consumers to purchase non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages, observed in recent years, is, according to the President of the Management Board of the Polish Public Health Association, the desired direction of market development from the point of view of remodeling alcohol consumption in Poland, i.e., improving the structure of alcohol consumption, resulting in building more responsible consumer attitudes towards alcohol (Fal, 2020). All the more so because, as recent data show, alcohol consumption in society has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ramalho, 2020).

Due to the conditions of development of the segment of non-alcoholic equivalents of alcoholic beverages in Poland, in the competitive fight, products that are substitutes for alcoholic beverages, as a separate category, should be positioned in modern distribution channels as an innovative, attractive category of products with significant development potential and attractive market attributes for people, who, for various reasons, do not want or cannot consume alcohol, at the same time contributing to positive changes in social trends in alcohol consumption.

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