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To cite this article: Josefin Månsson , Eva Samuelsson & Jukka Törrönen (2020): Doing adulthood—doing alcohol: what happens when the 'sober generation' grows up?, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2020.1844173](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1844173)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1844173>



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Published online: 12 Nov 2020.



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## Doing adulthood—doing alcohol: what happens when the ‘sober generation’ grows up?

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### ABSTRACT

Since the 2000s, there has been a worldwide trend of decreased alcohol consumption among young people. Although recent studies have given multiple explanations for this, we know little about the meaning of alcohol for this generation as they enter adulthood. The aim of this article is therefore to describe and analyze the age-related views toward alcohol among this group as they transition from adolescents to adults. The study was based on 39 qualitative interviews with people aged 17–21. Theoretical concepts such as doing age and symbolic boundaries were used to analyze the material and investigate how age can structure alcohol use, and how alcohol consumption can be narrated to produce maturity and adulthood. The analysis showed that participants presented their relation to alcohol in nuanced and responsible ways, signaling maturity. The participants' navigation of acceptable alcohol consumption differs in terms of agency and control in different life phases. 'Doing adulthood' in relation to alcohol for abstainers and drinkers seems to center on the same understandings of legitimate behavior: being moderate, nuanced, and in control. This focus linked alcohol to the position these emerging adults hold in wider society, given that participants incorporated societal demands for a neoliberal lifestyle.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 June 2020  
Accepted 26 October 2020

### KEYWORDS

Alcohol; sober; emerging adulthood; qualitative; boundary work; doing age

## Introduction

Since the 2000s, there has been a worldwide trend of decreased alcohol consumption among young people (Pape, Rossow, and Brunborg 2018). Statistics show an increase in abstention among young boys and girls, as well as a decrease in amounts of alcohol consumed by those who drink. In Sweden, abstention among 15- and 16-year-olds rose from around 20% before the turn of the millennium to around 50% in 2016 (Englund 2019). Young people of today are called a 'sober generation.' This substantial decrease in young people's drinking has puzzled researchers, politicians, and the public, and little is still known about the mechanisms behind it (Raninen and Livingston 2018). Recent studies have presented multiple explanations, and our study is part of a

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longitudinal project investigating this change in drinking culture (see Törrönen et al. 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). In this project, young people in Sweden have been interviewed on three occasions. This article is based on the third interview occasion, including 39 participants with an age range from 17 to 21 years old. Previous results have concentrated on the first and second interview occasions to understand this change when the participants were 15–19 years old (Törrönen et al. 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The results corroborate previous findings (e.g. De Looze et al. 2015; ESPAD Group 2016), which suggest that young people are drinking less, and present several theories to explain this; e.g. changes in gender identity (Törrönen et al. 2019) and parental style (Øia and Vestel 2014) as well as increased social media use (Norström and Svensson 2014; Törrönen et al. 2020a). It seems that drinking alcohol is not as important in young people's self-representations today as it used to be (cf. Demant and Järvinen 2006). Other aspects of their lives, such as accomplishments in sports and health, family relations, and online presence seem more important. Young people's everyday life practices tend to be highly regulated by various kinds of demands emphasizing individual success (Törrönen et al. 2019).

Before the drastic change in the 2000s, heavy drinking was in Sweden viewed as a major rite of passage into adulthood (Sande 2002). Similarly, alcohol and binge drinking can be an important part of young people's identity construction (Measham 2004), particularly in the transition from childhood to adulthood (Beccaria and Sande 2003). Drinking alcohol has been perceived as central in making boys and girls stand out as mature, while non-drinkers have been seen as 'lacking a stable identity' (Demant and Järvinen 2006, 601). We do, however, know very little about the meaning of alcohol for the 'sober generation' as they become older and enter adulthood. The focus in recent studies on this particular generation has mainly been directed toward youth. But in a context where drinking does not seem to be an important activity for the majority of young people, it is central to understand how young people on the verge of adulthood make sense of alcohol in their self-representations. Previous research on generations that seem to stand out in relation to alcohol consumption, such as those who were young during the experiment to sell medium-strength beer in grocery stores in Sweden, does not necessarily point to long-term changes in consumption (see, e.g. Room 2002). There is nevertheless a difference between the reasons for the drastic changes in alcohol relations between the 'medium-strength beer generation' (e.g. policy changes) and the 'sober generation' (e.g. cultural changes). We therefore ask if the meanings of alcohol have changed in the early ages of adolescence and what happens when the historically unique 'sober generation' grows up and transitions from adolescents to adults. What becomes the role of alcohol and how does it fit with adult life? This is of specific interest in an environment with fairly strict alcohol policy. In Sweden, the legal age of drinking is 18 and individuals must be at least 20 to buy alcohol from the government monopoly retail store.

The quantitative measures showing the decrease in alcohol consumption are certainly important. However, the changing alcohol cultures among young people should not be understood as a simple lifestyle choice, as these cultures also reflect aspects of the young people's position in wider society. The change should therefore also be analyzed with qualitative measures in order to understand what meaning it has in a longer perspective and how it can be located within a broader social and cultural context (Pennay et al. 2018). Hence, the aim in this article is to describe and analyze the age-related perceptions of and positions toward alcohol as the 'sober generation' grows up. But instead of simply

assuming that age is a predictor of how people make sense of and use alcohol, we study the way young adults describe their alcohol use, or non-use, as a way of presenting themselves as adults—and thus as a way of ‘doing age’ (see Measham 2002). This focus taps into broader social trends around risk-taking and control, and the implications this has for self-presentations and respectability. More specifically, we investigate the role of alcohol in self-presentations of young adults; the meaning attached to alcohol, drinking, and getting drunk, and how this is related to maturity and adulthood. Following this, we do not focus solely on experiences of and reasons for either non-drinking (unlike, e.g. Bartram, Elliott, and Crabb 2017; Conroy and de Visser 2014; Frank et al. 2020; Herring, Bayley, and Hurcombe 2014; Nairn et al. 2006) or drinking (unlike, e.g. Bogren 2006; Burk et al. 2012; Demant and Törrönen 2011; Dempster 2011; Frederiksen, Bakke, and Dalum 2012) like much previous scholarly work. Instead, we explore the relations young adults in general have to alcohol, as a backdrop for their view on appropriate adult behavior.

Previous research indicates that, for example, peer norms among university students make it both easy to binge drink and that it is seen as a social advantage to do so (French and Cooke 2012). Previous research also points to young people over time becoming more focused on ‘sensible’ drinking within reasonable limits than on excessive drinking which includes loss of control (Kloep et al. 2001), that an ideal of conscientiousness is important in young people’s relation to alcohol (e.g. Bogren 2006), and that control is central in descriptions of legitimate alcohol use (Bakken, Sandøy, and Sandberg 2017). Generally, this period in life can be viewed as a time of emerging adulthood; a time when young people seem to have left adolescence but without having completely accepted and moved into adulthood (Arnett 2000; MacMillan 2006). In this article, we therefore investigate if previous ideas about alcohol in this life phase have any bearing for this generation.

### *Theoretical framework*

Just like constructionist research on gender has challenged essentialist views on masculinity and femininity (e.g. Butler 2004), age can be theorized as something performative. Studies on ‘doing’, ‘acting’, and ‘performing’ age suggest that regardless of how we categorize ourselves, in interacting with society there is an expectancy to behave in age-appropriate ways which we cannot avoid. Perceptions of what is considered appropriate behavior, appearances, and ideas for people in a certain age group are shaped by cultural norms (MacMillan 2006; Pietilä and Ojala 2011). For example, what defines adulthood is often described as maturity (e.g. Bogren 2006; Demant and Järvinen 2006), independence (e.g. Badger, Nelson, and Barry 2006; Laz 2003), individual responsibility (e.g. Arnett 2000), agency (e.g. MacMillan 2006), and norm compliance (e.g. Badger, Nelson, and Barry 2006; Dahl and Demant 2017).

In an influential article from 2002, Fiona Measham conceptualized the gendering on drug use by suggesting that it can be seen as a way of ‘doing gender.’ Building on constructionist ideas about age and Measham’s (2002) theory, we analyze the way young people present their alcohol use, or non-use, as a way of ‘doing age’—or more specifically as a way of ‘doing adulthood.’ This means that age is not the predictor of alcohol use, but that this substance use is a way of producing a certain age and presenting

age-appropriate behavior. We therefore focus on how alcohol use can be located within the context of broader social and cultural trends/changes, instead of looking at it as a simple lifestyle choice. Alcohol use is thus linked to emerging adults' position in wider society. Dahl and Demant (2017)—although they studied adult cannabis use—illustrate how the particular focus on 'doing age' is fruitful in showing how age can structure substance use *and* how substance use can be narrated to produce maturity and adulthood. As they point out, 'cultural expectations of appropriate adult behavior restrict adult users from smoking it [cannabis] in the same manner as they did in their youth' (Dahl and Demant 2017, 329).

Unlike the adult cannabis users in Dahl's and Demant's study, the participants in this study can be described as balancing between adolescence and adulthood. This 'emerging adulthood' phase (Arnett 2000) has been called a distinct period of the life course characterized by relative independence from normative expectations and adult responsibilities and thereby a time of exploring possibilities. As a contrast, maturity in relation to drinking can be conceptualized by adults avoiding risk and adventure and instead seeking to be social and in control of their drinking (Bogren 2006). To further analyze this age negotiation, we use the theory on symbolic boundary work by Lamont and Molnár (2002). They describe symbolic boundaries as 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, even time and space' (2002, 168). Symbolic boundary work thus equals relational processes where 'individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168). These boundaries and processes can be studied to analyze a wide range of social phenomena and social relations. Such boundaries can many times be viewed as oppositions, for example in legitimizing some behavior over other (e.g. drinking as mature/immature, moderate/excessive, or controlled/uncontrolled). In working with boundaries, we can also study how participants rationalize particular behavior in certain situations, creating situated legitimacy. Bakken, Sandøy, and Sandberg (2017) show how boundary work is a fruitful way of trying to understand young people's relationships with alcohol and adulthood. In their study, they analyze how young adolescents (12–13 years) perceive differences in youthful and adult drinking, and conclude that comparisons to other social groups function as a way of presenting themselves as mature. Symbolic boundary work thus helps people make sense of their own actions and classify them as, for example, either good or bad and legitimate or illegitimate.

## Material and methods

### Sample

The study is based on 39 qualitative interviews with young people in a longitudinal project that commenced in 2017. The participants were recruited from various secondary and upper secondary schools in the Stockholm region and smaller towns in central Sweden, as well as via non-governmental organizations and social media with the aim to reach a heterogeneous sample in terms of drinking practices and sociodemographic factors (for more information on recruitment, see Törrönen et al. 2019). The first wave of interviews commenced in 2017, the second in 2018, and the third in 2019. For this analysis, we have focused on the third interview wave. The sample consists of 16 men

and 23 women aged 17–21, with the large majority having turned 18 ( $n = 27$ ). Based on categorizations of parents' occupations, the participants' social class is spread out between lower ( $n = 14$ ), middle ( $n = 14$ ), and upper ( $n = 11$ ) class. In the third wave, the social situation of the participants was defined as engaged in upper secondary school studies ( $n = 13$ ), university studies ( $n = 13$ ), unemployed ( $n = 2$ ), or working part-time or full-time ( $n = 9$ ). Their relation to alcohol was categorized in three main ways: as abstainers ( $n = 13$ ), moderate drinkers ( $n = 13$ ), and heavy drinkers ( $n = 13$ ; drinking to intoxication at least once a month). The most significant change in alcohol consumption is the decrease of abstainers from first- to third-wave interviews (see [Table 1](#)).

### Interviews

The interviews were carried out during September 2019–January 2020. The interviews were mainly conducted over the phone ( $n = 32$ ), although some were done face-to-face ( $n = 7$ ). The interviews were semi-structured and covered four main themes: relation to alcohol (e.g. 'Can you describe why you drink/do not drink?'), relation to gambling, tobacco, and illegal drug use (e.g. 'What do you think about gambling for money?'), private economy (e.g. 'How do you prioritize alcohol compared to other expenditures?'), and expectations for the future (e.g. 'What do you think about your possibilities to do what you want in the future?'). The interviews lasted for 30–90 min (mean 52). The audio-recorded material was transcribed verbatim by a transcription company. The interviews were conducted by the first and second authors, both women around 40 years of age, which might have influenced what the participants wanted to share in the interview situation. The second author had conducted previous interviews and thereby established rapport with some of the participants.

### Analysis

The analysis was done in two main steps. As a first step, the transcriptions were read several times, and an empirically close coding which focused on prominent and coherent ways of talking about alcohol, maturity, and age was done in the software program NVivo. The analysis mainly focused on the interview themes of 'relation to alcohol' and 'expectations for the future.' This resulted in 31 codes, including 'no time for alcohol,' 'control,' 'responsibility,' 'drink to socialize,' and 'drink because of the taste.' As illustrated by these

**Table 1.** Overview of participants.

	Wave 1 / 2017	Wave 2 / 2018	Wave 3 / 2019
Gender			
Girls	32 (65%)	21 (51%)	23 (59%)
Boys	17 (35%)	20 (49%)	16 (41%)
Age group at wave 1			
Age 15–17	25 (51%)	17 (42%)	18 (46%)
Age 18–19	24 (49%)	24 (58%)	21 (54%)
Alcohol consumption			
Abstainers	24 (49%)	21 (51%)	13 (33%)
Moderate drinkers	13 (26%)	12 (29%)	13 (33%)
Heavy drinkers	12 (25%)	9 (20%)	13 (33%)
Total	49 (100%)	41 (100%)	39 (100%)

examples, some codes referred specifically to statements about non-drinking, while others related to drinking practices. As a second step, to dig deeper and search for similarities, despite these different practices and positions among the participants, the NVivo codes were analyzed using the theoretical perspectives of doing age (Measham 2002) and symbolic boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002). The codes were in this second step thematically analyzed, which allowed for three themes to emerge linked to the participants' age-related perceptions of alcohol; *nuances and complexities in alcohol narratives, spatial and relational changes, and individual control in lifestyle choices*.

## Ethics

The project is performed in line with ethical standards for qualitative social science research (Silverman 2010). Upon recruitment for each interview, all participants were given written and oral information about the project, the potential risks and benefits of participating along with a clear statement that it was voluntary and that participants had the possibility to withdraw at any time. In the results section, the participants have been de-identified by changing real names and omitting sensitive information. In the translation of extracts from Swedish to English, the aim has been to keep the original wording as exact as possible. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm, Sweden (ref. 2016/2404-31/5).

## Results

Outlined below are the three identified themes linked to the participants' age-related relations to alcohol. As will be seen, there are several similarities presented by the participants on what it means to be an adult and how adults relate to and consume alcohol, despite the heterogeneity in the material. The quotes presented below are illustrative examples of this, and should be seen as representative of trends in the data.

### *Nuances and complexities in alcohol narratives: Negotiating adult and youth drinking practices*

When the participants talk about alcohol during interview occasion three, they generally refer back to prior interviews and actively try to distance themselves from what they describe as previous, more immature, relations with the substance. These comparisons are not necessarily connected to the amount of alcohol consumed, as this sort of boundary work surfaces both among those who had previously described themselves as non-drinkers and those who had been identified as heavy and moderate drinkers. Instead, what these comparisons have in common is that they emphasize a more nuanced relation to alcohol, narratives about less black-and-white thinking about drinking, and reasons for drinking and drinking situations.

This is implied by the decrease in abstainers in the material (see Table 1) and is illustrated by Alice. In previous interviews, Alice did not drink alcohol, but described in the third interview that she now drinks a little (therefore categorized as a moderate drinker in interview occasion three). She says she can have a glass of wine when the occasion is appropriate because she likes the taste of it.

- Interviewer: Was there any difference in turning 20, being able to buy alcohol?  
 Alice: No, I don't think it has anything to do with that. Of course, I have gone to Systemet [Swedish alcohol retail store] at some point, but it wasn't the triggering factor. I think it's just a coincidence of how I have evolved as a person and [...] sort of look at alcohol. I have never been one who drinks a lot. [...] not that I have to drink to have a sense of belonging, but I have felt that "yes, I want to be able to have a glass of wine and feel ..." It is difficult to explain.
- Interviewer: Is it sort of a social thing?  
 Alice: Yes, but it has not been that. [...] I have just changed my attitude, although not to the complete opposite. (Alice, 20 years, moderate drinker)

To Alice, her decision to start drinking is not described as a drastic change, but rather something she has grown into. She is no longer actively against drinking, but accepts alcohol and wants to be able to 'have a glass of wine.' Similar, and less absolute, views on alcohol consumption surface in several interviews with participants who had previously chosen not to drink. For example, Esther (21 years, abstainer), who comes from a family of abstainers and is still a non-drinker, states that when she was younger she thought 'everything about alcohol was garbage' and refused to be around people who drank. In the third interview, this has changed and she says that 'sober people can be at the same events as people who are drunk, at least a little tipsy, and still have fun. It is less black-and-white now.' Although both Alice and Esther describe their new and less categorical relation to alcohol as more nuanced, they also draw a clear boundary against 'drinking a lot' and drinking for the wrong reasons (e.g. having 'a sense of belonging').

A similar movement toward more nuanced alcohol relations is described by those participants who on previous interview occasions identified as active drinkers. Both participants who previously could be labeled as moderate and heavy drinkers now described how their relation to alcohol had changed—and just like in the quote above, this sort of reasoning often revolves around drinking wine. These participants describe having discovered new ways to drink alcohol that are less focused on drinking strong liquor and 'getting drunk,' and more focused on enjoying a glass of wine at dinner or as a social activity. Wine thus comes to represent a new relation to alcohol, as illustrated below.

Usually there is an idea to go out [when we drink], [...] but sometimes I have asked a friend to sit at a restaurant and have a drink and talk. And then, maybe last month, me and a friend sat down for a glass of wine and played adults. Had a glass of white wine. It didn't taste good, but I thought it was fun because usually we feel small and childish, but now we acted like adults do [...] So we went to her place for a glass of wine to be sort of mature, and then I went home. (Caroline, 18 years, heavy drinker)

This quote illustrates how many of the participants who do drink have not given up binge drinking, but they say that getting drunk is no longer *the only* reason they drink alcohol. Instead, they have added the practice of drinking wine because it is an accepted social activity to do with friends (what Bogren 2006, calls 'conscientiousness-in-sociality' on p. 533) or because they like the taste (like Alice above). Wine drinking in Scandinavia represents controlled and civilized European drinking habits, and by describing more moderate wine drinking the participants identify with a middle-class drinking culture that emphasizes matters of taste and self-control (Olsson and Törrönen 2008). The majority



of the participants, despite their different backgrounds, stressed this image of preferred adult drinking practices.

Most participants also describe this as a negotiation between their previous and expected future view on alcohol; they distance themselves from their previous stance as immature but they do not yet identify as 'adult drinkers.' It repeatedly surfaces in the material that alcohol should not be considered a central activity for adults. This is illustrated by Abdul below, who describes his view on future drinking:

The amount [of alcohol] won't be much at all. Very little I would think. [...] Some time you will do it [drink alcohol], but I think it will change totally. Because then you will have your job and you will be more responsible. Live alone and take care of more stuff. And I don't know, but I don't think I will even think about it, you just won't care. You will have other things on your mind. (Abdul, 20 years, moderate drinker)

Here, alcohol is weighed against other responsibilities in adult life (e.g. 'live alone,' 'take care of more stuff') that are believed to have more relevance. Abdul emphasizes that alcohol will be a non-issue, and just like most participants, he describes his future relation to alcohol as being very moderate. A dominant image of future drinking in the material is that the participants will not get drunk although maybe tipsy at times, drink on occasions like dinner with friends, and primarily drink wine because they enjoy the taste of it. Being seemingly drunk and 'teetering about' is described as immature and embarrassing for adults. By, for example, introducing the new practices of 'drinking a glass of wine' to justify their drinking, the participants approach this future image of adult drinking.

Depending on which practice is accentuated, alcohol can thus be used to claim either adulthood (moderate wine drinking) or adolescence (excessive spirits drinking or strict non-drinking). Most participants do not draw strict boundaries between these practices in relation to their own behavior; instead, they describe how this depends on the location and social situation. This demonstrates flexibility in ideas about drinking and can be interpreted as a reflection of their societal position as emerging adults (see also Bakken, Sandøy, and Sandberg 2017; MacMillan 2006). Through their alcohol use, the contexts of alcohol use, and the wider socio-cultural context of alcohol cultures these participants demonstrate how they navigate between adulthood and adolescence. There is also a convergence between previously more scattered and 'extreme' thoughts about alcohol, and consequently less polarization between abstainers and drinkers in how they relate to alcohol. This more nuanced way of relating to alcohol illustrates how the participants signal personal growth and maturity in their talk about alcohol.

### *Spatial and relational changes: Navigating in acceptable alcohol behavior*

At interview occasion three, life has changed for many participants in terms of both spatial and relational aspects. Such changes are connected with becoming objectively older, as the majority have recently left upper secondary high school and started working or become university students. This means that some of them have moved to new cities and that most of them have met new people. Such changes are described as influencing the relation participants have with alcohol and how they want to behave when they are around alcohol. To some participants (e.g. previous abstainers or moderate drinkers) this means that they have encountered a context where they feel that they can drink, and

have increased their drinking. To some participants (e.g. previous abstainers) it means that they now want to be able to be around alcohol even if they do not drink, and some (e.g. previous heavy drinkers) describe how they have modified their consumption to drinking more often but smaller amounts. What these participants have in common is thus not necessarily connected to how much they drink, but how they want to behave around alcohol when they socialize in these new situations. The participants describe this as an act of balance that is sometimes difficult to achieve.

To be able to be around alcohol and drink moderately is described as a powerful 'social lubricant' in new social settings, as illustrated by Lily below:

Alcohol makes you more relaxed and makes it easier to get to know one another. And for many people who drink it becomes sort of a common activity, a common interest you might say. And that makes it easier to find each other. And then it is an easy thing to do with people you don't know that well. Go out together, have a glass of wine together.  
(Lily, 20 years, heavy drinker)

Lily here describes how alcohol is a social activity for deepening shallow relationships with, for example, new classmates at university, and for making new social settings more relaxed. It is however clear that the focus is not on experiencing intoxication. Instead, the activity of having 'a glass of wine together' is portrayed as an adult-like social ritual that in a well-mannered way produces shared experiences and realities to strengthen friendship ties (Collins 2004). Socializing with and around alcohol in this manner sends a signal of maturity and adulthood, as it shows agency and control in relation to alcohol (MacMillan 2006). In these descriptions, it is the participant that is in control of the situation, and the alcohol is a mere mean in the pursuit of socializing. Still, the participants also describe the difficulty it sometimes means to keep this control while drinking alcohol. Exemplifying this is the recurring theme of drinking too much that surfaces during the interviews.

Several participants describe having elaborate strategies for not drinking too much (e.g. not drinking strong liquor, having a group of friends that check up on each other), as this is considered immature and something that people without alcohol experience do. Some participants, like Khalil (17 years, moderate drinker), say that they used to like the feeling of losing control while drinking, but that this is now connected to a bad feeling of 'not remembering stuff and embarrassing yourself.' The boundary between behaviors described as acceptable and unacceptable thus seems related to agency; being out of control is no longer seen as a respectable way of presenting oneself. Stories about drinking too much can be related to physical discomforts (e.g. feeling sick), but the main boundary is drawn against friends who drink too much and set against bad behavior such as 'being mean or nasty' (unlike e.g. the narratives on drunkenness in Bogren 2006). It is clearly not the amount of drinks consumed that is measured in these narratives about drinking too much, but how one reacts to alcohol; e.g. 'being fun' or 'dancing like crazy' is described as being OK even if a person is clearly drunk. Both drinkers and abstainers describe this boundary and emphasize bad behavior as the primary sign of being out of control.

It is not only the new social aspects that seem connected with moderation; the participants also stress that being around alcohol is at this point in their lives connected with different places than before. Previously, the participants experienced being around

alcohol primarily at house parties. The main places that are described for alcohol consumption at interview occasion three are more public such as bars, clubs, and restaurants.

When we go out to bars it is not about that [alcohol]. To sit down and have a glass of wine, it is probably not about drinking wine, but about socializing and talking. And then, the wine is sort of on the side of that. Drinking is not what is in focus. [...] But I think that there are people who drink just to drink. And perhaps that is what you do if you are at a dance place or a club or something. (Olivia, 18 years, moderate drinker)

As seen here, moderate alcohol consumption is closely connected to particular places such as bars and restaurants; and the participant is careful to make clear that in these settings alcohol is not 'the focus' (similar to the reasoning by Lily above). It is however also illustrated here that these 'new' settings are linked to differential use of alcohol as well as differential attitudes and behavior. For example, places like restaurants and bars become perfect places for socializing in a mature, controlled, and calm manner, while clubs are described as a setting for more excessive drinking and hedonistic behavior. Participants who do not drink rarely talk about going to clubs.

This illustrates how some behaviors that would typically be considered childish or immature can be normalized within a particular social context; e.g. at a club or on a skiing trip abroad. These settings are related to so-called time-out behavior (Measham 1996), where being drunk can be encouraged and permitted as appropriate behavior. Maturity can thus be seen as situationally accomplished and context-bound. However, when the participants describe adults such as their parents or 'people in their 40s and 50s,' they say it is unacceptable to 'reel about in a club.'

Well, 50-year-olds don't drink in the same way as 20-year-olds [...] It's not like they go out and party at Stureplan [central location for clubs in Stockholm] in the same way as 20-year-olds. I think a big change happens when you have kids and a family and stuff. But before that also. You know it is not good for you to drink, so you will scale down eventually. But I want to have fun now while being young, so I do it anyway. (Thomas, 21 years, heavy drinker)

The club as a setting thus seems strictly associated with and accepted for emerging adults, and it separates a particular type of maturity for this group. As the participants describe this navigation in acceptable behavior around alcohol at different phases in life, they point to the way of acting becoming more strictly regulated with age. The spatial and relational changes that occur in the lives of these emerging adults seem to spark thoughts about acceptable behavior that are deeply connected with agency and being in control. This will be also be in focus in the next theme.

### *Individual control in lifestyle choices: responsibility in relation to alcohol*

Generally, and irrespective of drinking status, the emerging adults in this study are concerned with making the right and rational choices in life. Regardless of whether the interviews touch upon studies, work, economy, or alcohol, the majority of the participants are careful to narrate their experiences, decisions, and thoughts about these aspects in a responsible manner. Apart from statements such as Thomas' wish to have fun when young in the quote above, stories about being young, free, and rebellious are for the most part lacking. Instead, the participants mainly talk about taking responsibility for their lives and creating a solid foundation for future. When asked how they view their

opportunities in life, they all refer to their own efforts as a guarantee for a bright future. This type of reasoning also surfaces when they talk about alcohol.

And I know that it is a really intense education. It is like, at the legal education program you can choose to party, but you won't do as good. And I'm much more interested in having a good future than having one night of fun. (Emily, 21 years, heavy drinker)

Here, Emily illustrates this personal responsibility in a very distinct way by comparing having 'one night of fun' to having 'a good future,' and how this is a choice students have to make. According to this reasoning, it is impossible to combine heavy drinking with succeeding in life and being responsible. Although Emily is classified as a heavy drinker at the third interview, the quote illustrates how she plans to change her drinking habits when she becomes a student (she is currently working in a bakery). Similarly, those participants who drink generally describe the need to 'plan' their drinking occasions so that they do not interfere with any obligations in life (compare this to Measham's (2002) concept of 'controlled loss of control'). As Oliver describes below, drinking without such planning might impact on your work performance:

I really don't have the energy to do that [drink on weekdays]. I won't be able to enjoy the evening, and I will only be like "I need to get up at seven, I need to go to work" and I will certainly be boring with my pupils. So, I don't feel that it is worth it. (Oliver, 21 years, heavy drinker)

In these narratives, controlled drinking, or non-drinking, is also described as essential in taking responsibility for yourself and your relationships. Take Arin in the quote below: she drank at interview occasions one and two, but has not had a drink for a year and a half when we meet her for interview occasion three. She is hoping to enter medical school soon, takes care of her sick mother, and works hard to save money for a nice car. Arin describes drinking as unnecessary and as something that could hinder her from achieving her goals, but it is also as related to control:

- Arin: [My friend] and I went to [country] two weeks ago. We were there for ten days, and we were there with two other male friends and two of [friends'] brothers. We went to a lot of clubs and cafes, and everybody drank there. Our friends also drank, and I didn't even drive, we took taxis, but I chose not to drink. Maybe subconsciously because [friend] was there and I want to keep track of everybody. Because I'm from [country], so I want to keep track of everybody. But still, I could have had a glass, but no, I didn't. I think I have grown out of it.
- Interviewer: It's not a big thing for you?
- Arin: No. It's like you would ask me "Why don't you drink Coke? How often do you drink Coke?" It's like no, I drink it if I want to. (Arin, 20 years, abstainer)

As seen in this quote, control is related not only to bigger life choices such as commitment to an education, but it is also related to having control in particular situations and taking responsibility for friends (Caluzzi, MacLean, and Pennay 2020). The quote from Arin further illustrates how mature drinking is presented as an act of free will (e.g. 'I drink it if I want to'). Our material contains several examples of participants' describing situations where it would have been 'easy' or 'normal' to drink, but they chose not to. It is also recurrently stated that consuming alcohol is not important, which is illustrated in Arin's Coca Cola

example. By comparing their own consumption (or non-consumption) as guided by free will, with those who 'can't enjoy a party without alcohol,' 'who have to drink to have fun,' and 'who drink to feel better about themselves,' a clear boundary is drawn between drinkers with agency (themselves) and drinkers without it (others) (Bakken, Sandøy, and Sandberg 2017). Those who drink to manipulate their emotions are described by the participants as unable to 'be themselves' in social situations without drinking, which is considered as detrimental to their agency. By non-drinking or moderate drinking they thus seem to enact authenticity (Caluzzi, MacLean, and Pennay 2020). If a person consumes alcohol, it should be driven by individual agency for it to be accepted as mature—not by peer pressure, by feelings of insecurity, or as a means of trying to feel better. The participants distance themselves from peer pressure and describe this as a practice related to immature drinkers such as younger adolescents and to insecure people of their own age. Moreover, the participants in this study do not describe it as difficult not to drink when interacting with people their own age (cf. Hepworth et al. 2016). They say that such choices are not questioned, that there is a pronounced prohibition against pressure to drink, and that non-drinking is an option generally 'built into the system' at, for example, student clubs and first-year students' introduction weeks.

Although it may seem surprising that the participants in this study have such focus on control and responsibility irrespective of their different positions in society, it is in line with previous research suggesting that life in modern society is marked by performance culture and individualization among young people (e.g. Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011; Ekendahl, Månsson, and Karlsson 2020; Törrönen et al. 2019). The results here show that the individuals in this study may come from different societal positions and have different drinking behaviors, but they all problematize drinking that they view as irresponsible and not driven by agency and control. By distancing themselves from peer pressure and emphasizing that they do not 'need alcohol' (e.g. to have fun or to be themselves), they thus 'do adulthood' by accomplishing their independence from both social pressure and the substance. Similarly, by stressing agency, control, and responsibility in their relation to alcohol, the participants can mark a distance to alcohol and accomplish a confident, mature, and independent persona. In these responsabilized narratives, it is not sobriety or drinking that seems to be at the core, but rather to be a person who makes the right choices, avoids risks, and plans successful lives.

## Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the interviews in this study underlines that the emerging adults of the 'sober generation' are careful to present themselves as competent actors with prudent lifestyle projects. The themes described above all represent different positions in how the participants accentuate such responsible thoughts and behaviors; e.g. by being able to socialize around alcohol and enjoying a glass of wine without drinking too much, by only consuming alcohol at places and times when it does not affect other important aspects of life, and by emphasizing agency and lack of peer pressure on drinking occasions.

What these results also suggest is that the significant changes in drinking and alcohol attitudes among young people of today (see, e.g. Lintonen, Härkönen, and Raitasalo 2016) might not continue to hold true for this group as they enter adulthood. Rather, the results

from this study indicate that how these participants 'do adulthood' in relation to alcohol is similar to how previous, and more wet, youth generations have acted in this transgressive phase of their lives. For example, the focus on maturity, control, and conscientiousness still seems central in presenting an appropriate narrative of age-appropriate drinking (Bogren 2006), and that more nuanced and 'sensible' views on alcohol become more present over time (Kloep et al. 2001). Such approaches are also in accordance with previous research on what behaviors and ideas are considered suitable for emerging adults (Badger, Nelson, and Barry 2006; MacMillan 2006). Although the cultural norms for adolescents seem to have changed in such a way that it has affected the relations this group has to alcohol, it does not appear equally certain that these changes continue to influence the behavior and attitudes for this group as they enter adulthood. Rather, the results in this study suggest that the behavior and ideas about alcohol are relatively similar to those of previous generations. One way to interpret this is that the cultural changes that have influenced the massive decrease in alcohol consumption at younger ages are more in line with age-appropriate behavior that has previously been connected with older age groups and maturity. It is usually said that adolescence is a life phase that has been prolonged in modern times (Twenge and Park 2019)—but our analysis rather suggests that the participants in this study are more concerned with being viewed as responsible adults than as rebellious youth (Törrönen et al. 2019). This might be the reason why they, instead of focusing on pleasure and hedonism (Measham 2004), emphasize control in their views on alcohol, which, as an emphasis, may somewhat differentiate the current generation from earlier generations and is a good topic for further research.

Although the views on alcohol seems to have become increasingly similar among the different consumer groups in the study, it should not be neglected that there is still a significant group of non-drinkers in this material. Further, there seems to exist an acceptance of non-drinking that has not been described in previous literature (cf. French and Cooke 2012). This implies some differences from previous generations as well and needs further investigation, as recent studies from similar environments suggest that abstaining from alcohol is still a difficult decision for young adults (Frank et al. 2020).

The population in this study is broad, contains both drinkers and abstainers, and represents an age group both under and above 18 years of age (the legal age limit for consuming alcohol). This is a strength, as the rather extensive and diverse sample points to similar relations to alcohol. For example, the way of 'doing adulthood' seems to center on the same understandings of legitimate behavior for non-drinkers and drinkers. They seem to do similar kinds of boundary work towards adulthood through their understandings of drinking and non-drinking. In the process of attaining a mature lifestyle they use similar conceptual distinctions and definitions of reality.

The nature of the sample is, however, also a limitation and poses challenges to drawing conclusions. Another limitation is the possible tendency of the participants to frame themselves as conscientious individuals in the interview situations. This means that the results presented here need to be interpreted with some caution as the particular focus on responsible behavior in this article can be influenced by this sort of limitation. However, the participants also shared detailed stories of uncontrolled occasions of heavy alcohol consumption, and the results point in the same direction as previous research that emphasizes responsabilization among other groups of young people in Sweden (e.g. young cannabis users in Ekendahl, Månsson, and Karlsson 2020).

It can be concluded that the emerging adults in this study are concerned with appearing as responsible, mature, and self-reliant no matter if they are heavy, moderate, or non-drinkers. Although the interviews were primarily focused on alcohol, what stands out in the analysis is this particular way of approaching life in general and doing adulthood. Alcohol serves as one way of demonstrating such responsibility, agency, and control. As such, alcohol is linked to the position these emerging adults hold in wider society and how they incorporate societal demands for a neoliberal lifestyle.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, under grant number 2016–00313 and The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs, under Grant FO2018-0048.

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