

# “... if there’s a party, then there’s definitely alcohol”. Construction of partying practices and abstinence in Estonian youth forums

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## ABSTRACT

**AIMS** – Adolescents’ abstinence from alcohol has not been much researched in terms of providing suggestions for prevention strategies. This study aims to fill that gap by offering a practice theory-inspired analysis of how the unwritten rules of partying practices are communicated between posters of Estonian youth forums. **DATA** – These forums are novel objects of analysis in research on teenagers’ alcohol use, and the article shares some topical experiences. **RESULTS** – The findings of the analysis show that non-drinking at teenagers’ alcohol-related social gatherings is generally communicated as a non-tolerated individual performance that is seen to erode the whole collective partying practice. Young people therefore suggest in forums various mimicry strategies to justify non-drinking. **CONCLUSIONS** – The article casts doubts about the efficiency of risk awareness raising and teaching individual skills in this context because they provide little help for those youngsters who have already been recruited into partying practices and who need peer legitimization to leave these practices. The authors pose suggestions for gradually making the current alcohol-related partying practices more tolerant of non-drinkers, thus opening “sub-culturally supported roads” to personal autonomy.

**KEYWORDS** – adolescents, alcohol, abstinence, youth culture, prevention, practice theory

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## Introduction

Collective activities and peer influence are crucial in teenagers’ alcohol consumption (e.g. Järvinen & Gundelach, 2007; Paek & Hove, 2012; Epstein et al., 2008). In leisure activities with their peers, teenagers encounter collective rituals “prescribing” drinking. What can they do when they do not want to drink? This article analyses teenagers’ perceived and experienced options regarding abstaining from alcohol

and discusses how this knowledge can be used in the prevention of young people’s alcohol abuse.

Studies on abstinence have highlighted the question of health (e.g. Fekjær, 2013; Green & Pollen, 2001; Leifman, Kühnhorn, Allebeck, Andréasson, & Romelsjö, 1995). They have showed that both former drinkers and lifelong abstainers had worse health outcomes than current drink-

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ers (Green & Polen, 2001), which has led to methodological critiques (Stockwell & Kerr, 2009). The current study is more in line with research on motivation and prevention approaches regarding drinking (e.g. Anderson, Briggs & White, 2013; Spoth, Redmond, Hockaday, & Yoo, 1996; Stritzke & Butt, 2001). The authors have found that culturally abstainers need “legitimate” reasons, and unsanctioned abstainers – who dislike the taste or effect – need to “work” harder in order to be accepted by peers (Conroy & de Visser, 2013), which may lead to simplifying solutions to the problem by improving abstainers’ skills. This study looks at the problem from another angle: how to change collective behaviour patterns.

First, the theoretical underpinnings and methodological considerations are explained, followed by an exploration of the cultural context shaping teenagers’ partying practices and Internet forum use. This is followed by a presentation of the empirical findings and the conclusion. The article ends with a discussion and suggestions on how to make the development of more tolerant partying practice a strategic goal in prevention programmes.

## Theoretical framework

The range of disciplinary approaches from which young people’s alcohol consumption has been investigated is varied. While the social-psychological approach explains individual predictors or mutual links between individual and environmental factors (see e.g. Lewis, Neighbors Lindgren, Buckingham, & Hoang, 2010), the sociological and cultural studies approach focuses on links with general changes in economic and political devel-

opment, seeing the late modern, hybrid and risk-prone youth culture as a product of consumer capitalism and of the emergence of the risk society (e.g. France, 2007; Bennett & Kahn-Harris, 2004). Several studies use the anthropological approach, which concentrates on the whole cultural pattern and the inner heuristic of subjects’ actions (e.g. Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2007).

Applied research in adolescent and young adult substance use prevention strategies is drawn mainly from the socio-psychological paradigm through planned behaviour theory (e.g. Ajzen, 1985; Glassman, Braun, Dodd, Miller, & Miller, 2010) and social norms marketing (e.g. Neighbors et al., 2011; Perkins, 2002; Real & Rimal, 2007). These approaches have been criticised (e.g. Cameron & Campo, 2006; Merzel & Afflitti, 2003; Shove, 2010) because of their neglect of the social context where individuals’ everyday behaviour occurs, which therefore leads to short-term impacts. New views of prevention stress the importance of considering multiple and complex modifiers of risk (Sumnall & Jones, 2010). The critical revision of the individual-based approach has led to community-based preventions (e.g. Cheon, 2008; Fagan, Hawkins, & Catalano, 2011), which, however, require the existence of “natural” communities. Their applicability is therefore limited.

The theoretical inspiration of this study comes from social practice theory (Schatzki 1996, 2002; Reckwitz, 2002), which has foundations in philosophy, anthropology and sociology (Rouse, 2007). Practice theorists strive to resolve the conflict between individual will and social determinacy by emphasising the importance of physi-

cal and social routines. For analysis, it is crucial to distinguish between practices as performances and as entities (Schatzki, 2002). Practice as entity is a *nexus of doings and sayings* (Schatzki, 2002), a recognisable and meaningful pattern of action which is maintained and transformed by the interconnected nodes of things, meanings, procedures, rules, technologies, etc. (Warde, 2013). Practices as entities are embedded in certain socio-cultural environments, are seen as the basic unit of analysis and require change if we wish to achieve a new normality. Practices as performances are actual occurrences of activities that can be carried out somewhat variedly and still be recognised as manifestations of certain practices, such as collective, cultural entities. The question of whether an activity is a legitimate part of a practice or not (Warde, 2013) has been crucial in this study. It has made it possible to discover links between individual performances and collective patterns and suggest fruitful ways to transform current normalities<sup>1</sup>.

In this study, we asked how teenagers who were in the process of introducing themselves to adult-world practices felt and communicated the available repertoires related to alcohol and various forms of socialising, spending free time, relaxing and celebrating. Earlier studies suggest that alcohol at teenagers' parties is a silently established norm (Parder, 2011). Drinking may occur at formal school parties and be considered "normal" (Smith, 2015). When everybody is drinking at a party, non-drinking and socialising at the party may seem abnormal. Youngsters' alcohol-related practices are not structurally supported: they are legally prohibited, and access to the relevant products and

spaces (i.e. places for the party) is limited, although advertisements and other forms of meaning-making spread without formal limits. In the case of formally discouraged practices, unwritten rules and informally communicated rules of conduct, the coordination of these practices may be stricter in order to maintain the identity of practice as entity. This was taken as a working hypothesis for this study.

We have aimed to explain how teenagers perceive their opportunities to "normalise" non-drinking party participation without being excluded from the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). By analysing how teenagers themselves discuss options of refraining from alcohol and give advice in Internet forums, we discuss the possibilities of making alcohol-related partying practices more inclusive of non-drinkers.

## Alcohol consumption practices among Estonian teenagers

Estonian statistics show high consumption of alcohol, similarly to many other Eastern European countries (Popova, Rehm, Patra & Zatonski, 2007). Despite the growing public lament about drinking as a harmful habit, the cultural connotations of alcohol consumption are rather positive. Qualitative studies and critical discourse analysis show that the meaning of drunkenness is closely connected with freedom from daily routines and duties (Raudne, 2012), such as during holidays, vacations, and family and friendship traditions (Trink, 2015). There is a rich repertoire of party talk that discursively minimises the amount of alcohol intake and shows the drinker's condition as safe for oneself and others (Trink, 2015). This legitimises alcohol as a posi-

tive element of party and leisure practices.

Raudne (2012) argues that alcohol enjoys strong cultural hegemony in the Estonian public discourse, being related to national identity, security and patriotism. The alcohol industry re-cultivates the narratives and public archetypes that were invented in the Soviet era as a part of the political economy (Raudne, 2012). Indeed a popular TV series produced for the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Estonian Republic contained frequent episodes where characters drank vodka to celebrate turning points in their own and the republic's lives. The journalistic framing of the mediated discussions over the anti-alcohol campaigns essentialised drinking as a part of the Estonian historical tradition (Pauklin, 2011).

Health-informed prevention has become more powerful since the middle of the 2000s, including anti-alcohol media campaigns and setting time limits on alcohol sales. The Green Book of Alcohol Policy, which was approved by the government in 2014, has been criticised for placing the main responsibility on the individual without touching on the rights and duties of the industry (Raudne, 2014).

The legal age for buying and drinking alcohol in Estonia is 18. The Consumer Protection Board checks shops fairly regularly, but alcohol still seems to be fairly accessible to the young. The authors' observations and analysis of the media discourse (Pauklin, 2011) have shown that prohibition and strengthening control are the main arguments raised in topical public discussions. For example, partial prohibitions of alcohol advertisements (Raudne, 2012) are related to the prevention of teenagers' alcohol abuse. Teenagers are also educated to drink safely, and

discussing this topic is popular in youth Internet forums (Parder, 2011). However, the authors argue that parents' attitudes toward the drinking of their offspring are controversial. Parents are aware of the risks of alcohol, but they are also affected by the strong cultural hegemony of alcohol (Raudne, 2012). This controversy may lead to a double standard, avoidance of dealing with the problem in depth and attempts to save face publicly.

All these factors shape how (adult) alcohol-related practices are interpreted and resonate among teenagers. For Estonian young adults, there are two socially acceptable forms of drinking: frequently drinking small amounts and drinking large amounts on special occasions (Kobin, 2013). Studies in Estonia have shown that teenagers get introduced to alcohol pretty early, on average at the age of 12 (Aasvee et al., 2012; Orro, Martens, Lepane, Josing, & Reiman, 2011). The authors' personal observations, secondary analysis of the available research literature and discussions with researchers of young people's lifestyles lead them to believe that alcohol intake varies significantly among young people. In addition, subcultures vary in terms of size and composition of groups, places, types of alcohol, amounts consumed, purchase channels and parents' awareness of the situation. When alcohol is an accompanying element in celebration rituals (birthdays, holidays, school graduation, etc.), it seems to be harder to say "no" to alcohol, because it might be considered saying "no" to participation in the ritual (Parder, submitted).

Alcohol drinking is a central element at weekend binge drinking parties (Parder, 2011). The preparatory rituals of those par-

ties (invitations, looking for suitable places and buying drinks) make the alcohol intake meaningful as collective rewards and relaxation after effort, as well as symbols of togetherness (Parder, submitted). One of the rare anthropological studies on alcohol-related parties in Estonian rural areas shows that a lack of adult supervision leads to experimentation with alcohol, drinking to excess, conflicts and violence (Trell, van Hoven, & Huigen, 2013).

Ethical considerations demand informed consent, and subjects' awareness of researchers' presence makes it rather complicated to carry out observations of actual partying practices among teenagers. Some descriptions, based on the narratives of teenagers themselves, have been provided elsewhere (Parder, submitted). The aim of this study is, however, to investigate how teenagers themselves communicate the norms that make up the partying practice as a somewhat abstract, sub-cultural entity. The authors are well aware that a considerable part of the coordination is done non-verbally, but the verbal component is also important.

### Methodological considerations

It is reasonably complicated to find the key approach through which the communicative establishment and intermediation of the partly embodied, habitual patterns of doings and sayings can be researched empirically. Many of the empirical studies based on the practice theoretical approach have used texts from in-depth interviews. This inspired us to use text analysis methods. Instead of (group) interviews where the informants' talk is principally probed by a researcher, we wanted to find more natural settings where people verbally re-

flected on their actions and discussed possible alternative actions.

Researchers have argued that the new media architecture, everyday practices of the Internet and mobile phone use increase the individual's reflective actions, both concerning relationships and projections of the "self" (Filiciak, Danielewicz, Halawa, Mazurek, & Nowotny, 2013). Media-related communication thus has the potential to explain everyday normalities and reveal the social order of peer-to-peer relationships. It is argued that the new media interaction offers semi-public exchanges of information (Filiciak et al., 2013); asking for and giving advice constitutes one exchange type. Forum post analysis has successfully been used on other communities, such as ex-smokers (Burri, Baujard, & Etter, 2006), and on such problems as suicidal thoughts (Horne & Wiggins, 2009) and self-injury (Rodham, Gavin, Lewis, St Dennis, & Bandalli, 2013). Forums are novel research objects and it is therefore necessary to explain the wider social context of forum communications.

The Internet is widely used in Estonian teenagers' everyday lives: 82% of 9–16-year-olds use the Internet daily (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2010), as do 96% of 15–18-year-olds. All of them interact via Internet channels, with 54% using the Internet for communication with other people for one hour or more per day, and 24% using the Internet for communication for more than three hours per day (Me. The World. Media, 2014). For one-third of Estonian youth, sharing some kind of personal information via the Internet is a habitual activity, occurring at least once a week, and the same percentage of people participate actively in forum discussions

(Me. The World. Media, 2014). About 60% of young people say that they find it easier to communicate with other people via the Internet than through face-to-face interactions, and 44% report that on the Internet they disclose aspects of their lives that are not the subjects of face-to-face conversations (Me. The World. Media, 2014). Thus taking the Internet forum discussions as a subject of analysis is justified because they represent a rather habitual and safe form of youth communication. Ethical approval was not required for this study since the two ethics committees in Estonia handled only invasive and medical projects at the time of the study.

The method used was qualitative text analysis. Textual interactions of posters were analysed a) as a part of the nexus that holds together and transforms certain practices (text as fact), b) as expressions of what practitioners themselves regard as possible and necessary to say about what they are doing (text as reflection of experience), and c) as representations of the imagined range of repertoires of action that is considered normal and socially possible in a particular context (text as micro-model of social order). This enabled us to ask key questions:

1. How wide and elaborate, in comparison with other topical discussions, is the discussion in the teenagers' forums of the option of carrying out social practices related to alcohol without using alcohol?
2. How is the individual performance of permanent or occasional non-drinking communicated in relation to the whole alcohol-related partying pattern (i.e. partying practice as entity)?

3. What stories are told, what problems are referred to and when are the different options for personal conduct discussed?

### *Sample of study*

Empirical analysis was performed on the material of two forums: Lapsemure.ee (subtopic "Alcohol") and Stiina.ee. The aim of the forums is to give adolescents opportunities to counsel each other and to engage in discussions on different topics: relationship problems with peers or parents, sex, drug use, suicide, etc. Youngsters are mostly on their own there: site administrators intervene in very serious discussions, for example about suicide or child abuse cases. The initial sample was formed of 1472 forum posts on alcohol from 2008 until 2012. All parts of the interactions were coded separately.

The final sample was formed from 171 posts that concerned saying "no" to alcohol either indirectly in a situation where somebody else was advised to reject alcohol, or directly in a situation where the person posting had doubts or wanted to say "no". Also the interactions that consisted of rejection and approval of alcohol (discussions about saying "yes" and saying "no", or answers to questions) were included in the analysis of posts. Most of the posters who revealed their ages were 14–15 years old; the age of the posters ranged from 11 to 24. Posters mostly did not reveal their sex, but 131 said they were female and 74 male. There were also posts that did not include any information or indication of the age or sex of the poster where there were reasons to believe that they were written by minors. The reasons included indications of going to school

**Table 1.** Coding system of forum postings

|                          | Elements of alcohol-related practices or personal performance as reported in the Internet forums |   |   |   |   |
|--------------------------|--|---|---|---|---|
|                          | Meanings   |   | Skills  |   | Manifested personal performances in relation to alcohol without explanation or evaluation |
|                          | <i>Related to social status, relationships</i>   | <i>Related to age and transition to adulthood</i> | <i>Skills making it possible to act in accordance with meanings</i> | <i>Gap/conflict between meanings and skills</i> |   |
| contra-alcohol           |  |   |   |   |   |
| variations, negotiations |  |   |   |   |   |
| pro-alcohol              |  |   |   |   |   |

and hobby groups, language use in responding to certain topics, and referring to adolescents as “us” and grown-ups as “them”.

#### *Coding and analysis of posts*

The thematic coding of the texts was done on two axes (see Table 1). First according to their general meta-level morals: a) posts that clearly supported non-drinking, b) posts that supported drinking and rejected non-drinking, and c) posts that supported negotiable and situationally varied forms of conduct in alcohol-related occasions (see the first vertical column in Table 1). This analysis provided some insight into how restricted and clear-cut the alcohol-related practices in general were in the eyes of young people.

Secondly while maintaining the previous codes about the normative setting vis-à-vis alcohol, the posts were coded according to which elements of alcohol-related practices they reflected. Elements are uniting practices as nexuses of particular doings and sayings in meaningful entities. The coding was done on the basis of constitutive elements of practices with the aim of discovering what aspects of practices were verbally communicated. This coding proceeded from the assumption that

following the instructions for certain practice performances is easier when all constitutive elements for the performance of certain practices are clear and explained. The working hypothesis was that the actual embodied skills – how precisely to conduct certain micro-actions – are mostly poorly communicated. After trying several models, we chose the popular three-item model offered by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012), consisting of meanings (which include both knowledge and embodied procedural know-how) and things (material aspects and physical environments). In the course of coding, we had to modify the model because the posts did not contain references to materialities, which is in itself significant.

Under the category of meanings, we coded the texts that aimed to give meaning or justification to alcohol suggestions for or against. It was possible to differentiate between two sub-categories: content that presented alcohol-related actions mainly through the lenses of current social relations, and content that provided meaning in relation to the transition to adulthood.

Under the category of skills, we coded reflections on sufficient skills to carry out actions regarded as meaningful and appropriate, and reports about deficient skills in



following meaningful forms of conduct. The postings also consisted of short reports that did not contain sufficient information to be coded according to the elements of practice, but expressed posters' feelings for or against alcohol and were coded accordingly (Table 1).

## Results

### *Variety of actions presented in the forums*

About one-half of the postings were supportive of non-drinking and refusing alcohol. About one-fifth of the posts were clearly pro drinking. They either explained the reasons drinking was "beneficial" or were shorter declarations about the person's performance (e.g. "It's not a problem to be sober at parties for me, but I do not want to do so.").

About one-fourth of the forum posts supported, in various ways, the option of negotiable and varied performance in situations related to drinking alcohol. Thus the meta-context of the forum represented the personal and situational variety of conduct, communicating principally that the perception of alcohol-related practices among posters was not very strict. Without investigation of the reception, we cannot say whether encountering a variety of conduct in the forums really helped youngsters who turned there with their particular situational problems. The virtuality and anonymity of the forum environment may have a mixed effect. On the one hand, it may make people who write posts more honest and open-minded but, on the other hand, they may end up less flexible towards the available repertoires of action because they lack the situation-specific information that may broaden the variation of actual performance repertoires.

### *Rationalisations of non-drinking*

The transition to adulthood was one of the most important themes that orchestrated forum discussions about non-drinking. At one pole, there was an understanding that alcohol should not be tried in early youth, and that there was plenty of time to do it later in life: "there hasn't been a bash, but in the future I think there will be... Plenty of time" (Lapsemure).

The pro-drinking meaning-making was coloured by concern about the acquisition of skills for self-surveillance and self-governance, which demands risk-taking activities. Katainen and Rolando (2015) came to a similar conclusion, stressing that binge drinking in youth leisure culture strongly relates to the current neoliberal social order, with its expectation of self-governing individuals. Adolescence is considered to be a time to test limits, to test which kinds of alcohol consumption behaviour are personally, situationally and socially most suitable. As France argues: "Risk-taking, therefore, is constructed within a culture of urban consumption as acceptable and normal, bringing profits and benefits to an expanding cultural industry" (2007, p. 148). The relevant posts expressed the attitude that before turning 18 one should drink a lot and frequently acquire skills of self-control for adulthood: the skill of drinking without vomiting and without passing out, the ability to control desires and to stop drinking when that skill is required. According to this logic, alcohol consumption becomes a central element that supports the whole practice: the collective testing of abilities and collective discovery. The personal comment of an older participant illustrates this pro-alcohol meaning-making:



Those moments when I drank to get wasted are long gone ... I can have fun without being drunk (Lapsemure, 21)<sup>2</sup>.

The blurred boundaries between adolescence and adulthood mentioned by researchers (i.e. Henderson et al., 2007) are presented as clear-cut in this posting, coinciding mainly with the end of teenage years ("But now that the teenage time is over, as time goes by the more I'd like to party with dignity without drinking").

The forum opinions of the "right age" to start testing oneself varied between 12 and 16. This age range seemed to be the most negotiable in relation to personal drinking performance, and the amounts of alcohol used in these self-tests were expected to be small. Between 16 and 18 years, the meanings connected with non-drinking at parties, while other occasions were quite unfavourable. By age 18, the testing of abilities and skills was considered normal and refusing to do so at alcohol-related gatherings required extra explanations (to be discussed below).

The legal age limit feeds into the unwritten rules of alcohol-related practices of self-testing: by that age it was considered normal to know your limits and to be emancipated from semi-childish excitement seeking. The excitement created by consuming something that was legally prohibited was claimed to diminish when reaching the legal age:

Drinking and all kinds of parties are more exciting when you're underage. This is the reason :D Estonian youngsters quit drinking, rather than start, when they come of age (Lapsemure, 19).

Some postings indicated that parental mediation can partly break the excitement arising from prohibition if children are allowed to drink at home, but this does not provide opportunities for testing skills and limits because it cannot be done in the presence of parents. From age 15 to 18, the introduction of "safe drinking" and alternative simulated self-testing opportunities may be effective means to prevent further abuse.

### *Problems of quitting*

Researchers of dance drugs and club cultures have suggested that the drugs are consumed during a certain period of life, and usually young people do not continue consuming them in their later life, after entering the labour market or finishing their studies (e.g. Henderson et al., 2007; Sanders, 2006). The case may be different with alcohol, which is more easily accessible and is clearly "domesticated" in the mainstream culture and in different professional subcultures. In addition to the possible physical addiction that may develop during the "self-testing period", the forum discussions mentioned a certain "lifestyle addiction". The following quotation reveals how after crossing the legal limit – 18 years – a young "practitioner" felt the attraction of an alternative form of conduct, i.e. not drinking alcohol during weekends. However, she lacked the habits and experience to carry on other leisure practices and felt a vacuum arising from quitting drinking:

... I'm trying my best to stop this rubbish. I feel like I can do it, but I also feel weird: what am I supposed to do instead of drinking? ... (Lapsemure, 18).

Health-risk-only prevention programmes have been accused of leaving out those who are marginalised, poor or discriminated against (Roumeliotis, 2015). This study offers indirect support for this argument: in the alcohol-prone historical-cultural context, prevention that aims only at individual behaviour change may accelerate social differentiation and may not provide significant help for those seriously tackling the problem. In the case of very “tightly-packed” partying practices that demand the practitioner to take certain actions, social differentiation between parties with and without alcohol increases. Individual transfer between the types of parties occurs less frequently than being repeatedly “re-recruited” by the collective partying practice. Socio-economically less well-off families with lower educational capital cannot offer sufficient support for quitting harmful practices. These youngsters need special help where the principles of prevention and rehabilitation are united.

#### *Non-drinking, social relations and social skills*

The second category of meanings associated with advice concerned the connection between co-drinking and social bonds. Posters raised the problem of how to negotiate the conviction that alcohol consumption is harmful during collective rituals of alcohol consumption. Although some of the posts raised the issue of lacking the skill to refuse alcohol at social gatherings, the accompanying meanings explained that the problem was not so much linked to interaction skills as to fear of resisting implicit collective expectations and lacking the power to change those expectations.

The forum posts encouraged performers’ autonomy through stories reflecting personal experience, mini-guides or short (“correct”) performance statements. One type of advice given on the forums was strongly pro-autonomy but rather rough and laconic, e.g. “just don’t drink”, “just say no to yourself”, and “get rid of friends who have negative effects”. It is questionable how useful these suggestions are in real life, but some personal stories of successful “changing of friends” may have been morally encouraging.

The other strategy suggested was structural: not attending alcohol-related occasions at all. Information on alcohol-free parties was distributed in the forums, and posters with problems were encouraged to attend these parties. It was also recommended to leave a party if one did not want to consume alcohol:

... I think it’s totally normal if you leave a birthday party because of the alchies (Stiina).

The third type of advice suggested giving false excuses, such as taking antibiotics. Such advice actually strengthened the norm, because the advice did not deal with how to publicly problematise these norms, but rather with how to find individual opportunities that would leave social practices untouched.

Another group of stories told in the forums reflected the difference between individual and collective action strategies. Individual resistance is problematic and requires either structural separation or deception. Otherwise, the power of the majority is established, as the following excerpt shows:

When I go to parties with my friends, then they drink, and they all think I'm a total loser when I'm the only one who doesn't drink (Lapsemure, 12).

The individual resistance strategy also risks longer-term consequences: those following unexpected forms of action may be excluded from further gatherings in order to protect the identity of the practice. Some posters warned their peers of this:

No-one invites you, because no-one likes minorities (Lapsemure).

The collective altering of group norms was portrayed as having more potential for "normalisation". Many posters said that when there were several practitioners who did not drink, pro-sober performance was easy but being alone they could not resist alcohol. In the following example, alcohol is presented as a non-human agent that "reaches me", leaving the human actor in a passive role:

when I'm the only one who doesn't drink, alcohol eventually reaches me, but if there are others who are also sober then I can abstain (Lapsemure, 15).

The presence of non-drinkers at a party in itself communicates the meaningfulness and accomplishability of abstaining from alcohol. Some posters told personal stories of being accepted as "normal" without drinking and consuming drugs. Besides the fact that several people were not drinking, an important factor was the embodied skill of having fun, socialising and participating in a party while sober. For example:

I was once at a party, or, well, gathering, where there was alcohol and a hookah. I was mainly with total strangers, but some other friends and I didn't drink even a drop and didn't smoke the hookah, although it was offered several times, and we still had so much fun and it was very cool (the majority were quite drunk, but friendly) and the others didn't think badly of us or see us as being different (Stina).

From the posts, it emerged that being funny or making cheerful, witty comments made non-drinking acceptable to peers. Thus, within alcohol-related practices, non-consumption may be tolerated if the outer performance of those who were not drinking did not alter:

... some of my friends do not need alcohol at all to be totally funny or just cool... But generally yes, if there's a party, then there's definitely alcohol (Lapsemure).

It is unclear how often these kinds of experiences get communicated. In the observed forums, we found a few narratives. One way to make the alcohol-related practices of youngsters more tolerant of non-drinkers is the boosting of normalising agents, which will be discussed next.

## Discussion and conclusions

The empirical analysis of how Estonian teenagers understand their opportunities to abstain from alcohol at parties was done by using the conceptual framework from practice theory. The study asked how non-drinking as an option for individual partying performance was constructed within

the borders of party practice as cultural entity by analysing the interaction texts of two Estonian youth forums where posters give advice to each other on how to refrain from alcohol. The methodological experience from this study suggests that the text analysis of forum postings can give rather rich insight into the peer-to-peer socialisation and verbalised exchange of understandings about the unwritten rules guiding everyday actions.

Estonia represents a context of successful cultural transition of the alcohol industry from the Soviet to the neoliberal political system: positive cultural connotations of drinking have become richer, and the symbols of the old and new cultures are united in synergistic ways. Although legislation establishes underage alcohol-related party practices clearly as illegal and motivates adults (shopkeepers, sellers, parents, etc.) to prohibit youngsters from drinking, young people are living in the same cultural environment that connects alcohol with personal autonomy, freedom and national sentiments. Young people see adults' partying practices and feel pressure to learn these practices before coming of legal age.

The results of the current study show that teenagers' forum interactions generally construct alcohol drinking as a central element of their partying practices and non-drinking as harmful to the identity of the partying practice as entity, which is therefore not tolerated. Mimicry strategies were hence advised to justify individual non-drinking. Youth forum postings showed more respect for varying partying styles – with and without alcohol (based on collective decisions) – than for individual deviation from the collective pat-

tern (i.e. not drinking at an alcohol-related party). At the same time, individual variation in performance styles (i.e. drinking at one party and not drinking at the next) was constructed as a sign of autonomy and self-control.

The latter characteristics were used in the rationalisation of alcohol-related parties as necessary in the transition to adulthood. One of the central meaning-makers of drinking is testing oneself and learning physical and social skills before reaching the legal age, when one is expected to drink "with dignity". This study raises the issue discussed elsewhere that laws themselves may be an indirect cause of addiction (Steinberg 2005). Formally set zero tolerance may make the prohibited practices more exciting and their unwritten code of conduct stricter. Thus the prohibition, especially in generally alcohol-prone cultural contexts, is clearly not sufficient and requires a lot of accompanying actions.

This study also provides support for the argument that elaborating individual skills of abstinence may not be effective in the long term (Scheier, Botvin, Diaz, & Griffin, 1999) if the socio-material and cultural environment remains unchanged. The situation where abstainers avoid parties and drinkers do not change performances from drinking to non-drinking between parties creates conflict between the two approaches. Complete abstinence might be a healthy ideal but is unrealistic in terms of the logic of the socialisation process (becoming an adult is not a project with prescribed start and end points). In addition to developing social skills (Nargiso, Friend, & Florin, 2013) and programmes that combine anti-drug information with self-management

skills training (Lemstra et al., 2010), it is necessary to focus on the crafting of more “tolerant” partying practices among adolescents. This study shows that young people do think about the opportunities to develop tolerant interaction between drinkers and non-drinkers at parties, “under the same roof”, because they initiate topical forums. This study also shows that the anonymous peer-to-peer forum may be a better place to experience norm exchanges than social networks which involve revealing personal identity. The creation of (virtual) environments for the reflection of experiences and learning how to perform alcohol-related practices with dignity (including not pressuring peers) has the

potential to make the unwritten rules of alcohol-related parties less strict and more tolerant of individual non-drinkers who want to participate in parties. Group leaders can be ambassadors of a decent partying culture, which affords everybody the freedom to decide how to have fun.

**Declaration of interest** None.

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## NOTES

- 1 Practice theory-based initiatives have been used in the area of sustainable consumption (e.g. Shove, 2012; Umpfenbach, 2014).
- 2 This shows the forum and the age of the poster.

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