

# **Social identity and alcohol in young adolescence**

## **The perceived difference between youthful and adult drinking**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the evolving social identities of young adolescents in regard to alcohol and drinking culture in Norway. Detailed analysis of 29 focus group interviews and 32 individual interviews with 12-13-year-olds reveal a thorough negative attitude towards alcohol, especially when enjoyed by young people. Young adolescents found young people to be too irresponsible and immature to drink, while adults were portrayed as capable of enjoying alcohol without losing control or experiencing other negative effects. Through symbolic boundary work, they distanced themselves from adolescents who drank. The young adolescents rejected the idea that drinking alcohol was a sign of maturity; instead, they exhibited maturity by distancing themselves from drunk adolescents. We discuss how these findings reflect the participants' socio-cognitive development, and how symbolic boundaries are often drawn against those closest in social distance. We conclude that boundaries between 'adolescents' and 'adults' are fundamental when understanding emerging adolescent social identities, especially when it comes to drinking and drinking culture.

Keywords: adolescents, alcohol, socialization, symbolic boundaries, cognitive categories, social identity

## Introduction

The ongoing social and cultural negotiation of the difference between adults and adolescents is pivotal in understanding contemporary society. Much research has focused on how adolescence is constructed in research (e.g. Griffin 1993), in the media (Osgerby 2004) and at different stages of modernity (Griffiths 1996; France 2007). A common feature has been the relationship and transitions between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, and how these intertwined social categories have been characterized by dependence, semi-dependence, and independence (Griffiths 1996). Less attention has, however, been given to how adolescents describe themselves in relation to the other two age/social groups, and how they – especially young adolescents – use this social classification in active identity work. Young adolescents, such as the 12-13-year-olds in this study, are far removed from the distinct youth (sub)cultures described in much research on adolescence (Gelder 2005). They are generally not vanguards of societal change, but rely largely on adults for information and guidance in the process of exiting childhood and manoeuvring through adolescence.

Adolescence is a transitory period where individuals draw on different behavioural repertoires, shaping their own identity, behaviour, and culture (Fine 2004). In this transition between childhood and adulthood, behaviours, ideas, and attitudes stemming from the worlds of both children and adults may be labelled ‘adolescent’, depending on the time and place. Drinking alcohol can be a way to claim adulthood, but it is also a separate practice associated with adolescence itself – excessive ‘youthful’ drinking. The temporal and spatial fluidity of social values is illustrated well by adolescents’ attitudes to drinking. These can change from one minute to the other, depending upon social context and social networks. Adolescents for example, may be generally negative towards alcohol, but still try it if introduced by friends in a particular context. In most societies, only a small proportion of young adolescents have their own experiences with drinking alcohol. However, research shows that children have sophisticated understandings of alcohol and its effects from an early age, regardless of drinking experiences (Jayne & Valentine 2015).

In this study, we explore how young adolescents in Norway understand alcohol and how they relate to dominant understandings of youthful and adult drinking patterns. We look at how they distance themselves from those in close social proximity, and how they acknowledge the drinking practices of adults. We apply the concept of *social cognition* (Zerubavel 1991, 1997) to study the construction of social clusters such as adolescents and adults. While *symbolic boundaries* (Lamont 2002; Lamont & Molnár 2002) are used to study how these categories are used in identity work. By exploring how the delineation between

adults and adolescents is articulated and used by young adolescents in regard to drinking, we shed light on young people's social identity work and relate this to views on maturity in young adolescence.

Social cognition, boundary work and social identity

People rely on durable categories to make sense of the world. Zerubavel's (1997) cognitive sociology accentuates how categories are created by ordering objects and people into classes. These classes are not universal or natural, despite oftentimes being taken for granted, but are closely linked to human cognition (Zerubavel 1991). Through the cognitive practice of sense-making, experiences of collectivity are made possible. In this article, we explore such collective sense-making. Specifically, we study how young adolescents order the world into meaningful social entities. We aim to explore the 'fine mental lines' (Zerubavel 1991) that help young adolescents distinguish between the social clusters 'adolescents' and 'adults', and their negotiations of belonging to either of these entities.

The delineation of social entities can be said to reveal an underlying need to keep different groups of meaning separated from each other (Zerubavel 1991). However, the constructed categories are rarely as clear cut as they might appear. In fact, young adolescents themselves represent a challenge to this order. Adolescence is by default an ambiguous social category, something that affects the lines drawn between this category and that of children or adults. Transitions between the two latter states are neither final nor one-way, but the 'liminal' period of adolescence is characterized by gradual changes in how young lives are circumscribed by adults (Valentine 2003). This may take the form of an oscillatory motion, where adolescents switch between the social worlds of children and adults (Fine 2004). Despite being blurred on both sides, distinctions between adolescents and adults play an important role for young adolescents' conception of the world.

Individuals actively make sense of the world through symbolic boundary work (Lamont & Molnár 2002). By creating boundaries between themselves and other groups of people, individuals engage in the struggle to define their surroundings. In this struggle for social recognition, there is a pressure to evaluate one's own group positively in order to attain superiority (Tajfel & Turner 1986; Hall 1996). Such classifications are often founded in moral beliefs of what is right and wrong (Hitlin 2007). The drawing of lines between social clusters illustrates how individuals situate themselves in comparison and contrast to others. The relational character of identities has been emphasized in much social identity theory,

stretching from Barth's (1969) seminal text on ethnicity to contemporary research on contested street identities in drug and alcohol research (for a review, see Copes 2016).

Whereas the actual connections between identity and social structure can be debated (Côté & Bynner 2008), social relations are generally regarded as crucial to individuals' identity work (Duveen & Loyd 1986). Jenkins (1996, p.4) defines social identity as '(...) the ways in which individuals and collectives are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectives'. Put differently, identity formation involves the ascribing of both oneself and others to social categories through distinguishing practices (Jenkins 1996, 2000). By dividing the world into meaningful entities (Zerubavel 1991), separated by negotiated symbolic boundaries (Lamont 2002), the individual goes through an external identification process, thereby making their identification of others count (Jenkins 2000).

#### Alcohol and adolescence

Alcohol marks youth identity in two somewhat conflicting ways: as a rite of passage into adulthood and drinking heavily as part of youth culture (Farrington, McBride & Midford 2000; Room 2001). Drinking alcohol might be a symbol of boundary transgression (Beccaria & Sande 2003), especially in situations where status distinctions might be blurry, such as the delineation between adolescents and adults (Sulkunen 2002). Experimenting with drinking and partying is important for positioning in peer groups. It is often seen as a way to exhibit social maturity and represent a way for adolescents to experiment with identities (Johnson 2013; Demant & Järvinen 2006; Demant & Østergaard 2007). While abstention rates have been increasing in recent birth cohorts, both in Europe and internationally (Livingston 2014; Meng et al. 2014; Raninen, Livingston & Leifman 2014), discourse analysis show that drinking alcohol is still viewed as the norm by young people (Hepworth et al. 2016). Accordingly, abstention may be considered a radical alternative (Nairn et al. 2006) or as a sign of lacking 'a stable identity' (Demant & Järvinen 2006). Obviously, social identity and symbolic boundary work reflect age and social networks (Nairn et al. 2006), hence adolescent drinking may be regarded as deviant and 'unstable' by outsiders.

Drinking alcohol in adolescence is ambiguous, and adolescents' attitudes towards alcohol seem to be shaped by the attitudes of surrounding adults (Room 2001; Valentine, Jayne & Gould 2014; Eadie et al. 2010). In most countries, it is illegal for adolescents to drink alcohol, but drinking is also an expected ingredient in youth culture (Demant & Järvinen 2006). Youthful drinking both reflects and contrasts adult practices by reproducing and

resisting normative ideals of adult society (Room 2001). Certain drinking cultures, upheld by adults, also promote heavy drinking for adolescents as well (Rolando, Törrönen & Beccaria 2014). Nevertheless, parents, authorities and the media tend to promote moderate drinking or abstinence for adolescents. For example, adolescent drinkers are often portrayed as problematic in public and political discourses (Johnson & Milani 2010). This tendency is particularly present in Norway, with a long history of temperance movements and one of the strictest alcohol policies in the Western world (Brand et al. 2007). However, the Norwegian drinking culture is often characterized by excessive binge drinking, for both adolescents and adults (Bye & Rossow 2010). The latest trends in Norway have been moving towards a more “continental” drinking pattern, but drinking heavily on few occasions remains a defining characteristic of the drinking culture (Bye & Østhus 2011).

Diverging trends in adolescent and adult alcohol consumption have been observed in several European countries (Raninen, Livingston & Leifman 2014; Meng et al. 2014), Norway included (Brunborg, Bye & Rossow 2014). The increase in consumption peaked earlier and has been declining at a faster rate in the adolescent population than among adults. The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) shows that there has been a steady decrease in alcohol consumption among 15-16-year-olds in Europe as a whole since the turn of the millennium (ESPAD 2016). This is true for both lifetime prevalence and frequent drinking. Meanwhile, the age of alcohol onset has been stable in Norway over the last three decades, averaging at approximately fifteen years for all types of beverages (Vedøy & Skretting 2009). People under the legal age of eighteen still drink alcohol, but according to the statistics, they do so less often and more moderately.

Within this context of widespread negativity towards underage drinking coupled with declining alcohol rates among adolescents, our aim was to study the links between social identity and alcohol among young adolescents in Norway. The line drawn between adults and adolescents was the most important distinction employed to make sense of drinking practices in the interviews. This resulted in the following research questions: (i) how do young adolescents describe the difference between adult and youthful drinking, and (ii) how is this distinction used in social identity and symbolic boundary work among young adolescents? Collective images are powerful, and we argue that the collective constructions of differences between youthful and adult drinking have significant impact on how young adolescents regard drinking and how they actively form their own social identity by creating boundaries.

## Methods

Data in this study comprises 29 focus groups and 32 individual interviews with 141 12-13-year-olds (71 boys and 70 girls). Seven classes of eighth graders were asked to participate in qualitative interviews. The interviews were conducted in fall 2014 and spring/fall 2015. Three schools from the South-East region of Norway (two urban and one rural), two from a larger city in Western Norway, and two schools from the northern parts of Norway (one urban and one rural) were selected. The aim was to get variation in geography and social background. The focus group interviews were the main data source, but individual interviews were done as a supplement, which also made it possible to explore differences between interview settings. In two classes we did both group interviews and individual interviews, but responses did not differ much.

Interviews were conducted at the schools during school hours and lasted between 30 and 80 minutes. For the focus group interviews, the students were divided into groups of 3-6 students, mostly separated into same-sex groups to enhance openness, but we also had a few mixed groups. Teachers were consulted about group compositions to avoid particular constellations they knew could be problematic, but did not suggest any changes to the groups composed by the research team. The same general interview guide was used in both focus groups and individual interviews. Most of the questions were open ended, aiming to capture participants own thoughts about different subjects. Due to their young age, the questions about substances and substance use were particularly open and explorative, for example ‘What are your first thoughts when I say “alcohol”? To build trust and get more general information about youth culture, the first questions were about their life in general, such as school, afternoon activities, and social media.

Participants in this study are at the lower end of the age range 12-16 years, often used to describe young adolescents (Stallard et al. 2013). Interviewing young adolescents raises important questions about power dynamics. Whereas any interview will be shaped by interview constellation and context, the tendency to appear in appropriate ways may be especially strong for young people who are faced with adult interviewers (Eder & Fingerson 2001). That this study took place in a school context may have enhanced this limitation of the study. To compensate for the power imbalance in interviews we tried to hand some control back to the participants. The semi-structured interview design in both individual and focus group interviews allowed participants to shape the progression and content of interviews. In focus group interviews, we also facilitated a free flow of discussion. When groups were dominated by a talkative few, attempts were made by interviewers to include the more silent

ones by reducing the potential discomfort experienced when answering questions in the presence of others (Bryman 2012). While the social restrictions in a group setting may feel uncomfortable for participants, group dynamics produce valuable data about culturally expected views (Morgan 2002).

To assist coding and categorization we used HyperResearch, a software program for qualitative analysis. Data from interviews were first coded generally based on substances discussed (alcohol, illegal drugs, and tobacco). The interview extracts containing talk about alcohol were then re-coded into more specific codes, most importantly instances when participants described adolescent and adult drinking. This was not a specific question in the interview guide and had to be retrieved from several places in the interviews. A couple of interviewers did ask about these differences more directly, but only when following up the conversation in the interviews. On the issue of differences between adolescent and adult drinking, data from different schools as well as individual and focus groups interviews revealed very similar tendencies.

The study was part of 'MyLife', a longitudinal, multi-methodological, and national survey of adolescence and substance use. Assent from the participants and consent from their parents to participate in the study at large, were acquired beforehand with the schools' assistance. It was approved by the Norwegian Centre of Research Data (NSD). Due to sampling procedures and the open semi-structured approach in the interviews, results from this study cannot be generalized to account for differences between genders, regions in the country, or the adolescent population in Norway at large.

## Results

The young adolescents were critical of alcohol in general, but clearly distinguished between adolescent and adult drinking, and referred to these as two distinct categories of behaviour. When talking about adolescents they generally talked about people in close social proximity to themselves, such as older siblings or pupils, while references were made to a general idea of adults, often exemplified by their own parents. The expressed differences between youthful and adult drinking were apparent on many levels. In the first part of the analysis, we present the most important differences regarding (i) motivation for drinking, (ii) amount of alcohol consumed, and (iii) context for drinking. In the second part of the analysis, we show how young adolescents used these distinctions in reflections about the future and to present a moral self (Presser 2004). They drew symbolic boundaries with adolescent drinkers, while at

the same time realizing that their social identities and opinions about alcohol were in a process of change.

Differences between adult and youthful drinking

*Motivation for drinking*

The young adolescents described motivations for drinking as one of the most important differences between adult and youthful drinking. Generally, adults' motivation to drink was described as more sensible, taste-oriented and without the peer pressure and eagerness to get drunk that characterized adolescents' motivations to drink. Alice described the difference in this way: *'[for adults] [drinking] might be to relax, take a glass of wine on the weekend, like, when watching TV. Or it could be to be cool if you're younger'*. These were clearly separate categories of motivation describing two distinct phenomena in two correspondingly distinct social clusters (Zerubavel 1991).

The distinction made was one where adults drink to enjoy themselves on an individual level, while young people drink to be cool around others. An important difference was that adults like the taste: *'My dad doesn't drink to get drunk or anything. He drinks because. I think he likes the taste. He kind of thinks it's good.'* (Brita). Drinking alcohol is for adults what drinking soda is for young adolescents: *'They probably think it tastes good, just like we think soda tastes good.'* (Nicolai). Young adolescents perceived adult drinking as intertwined with enjoyment and relaxation: *'I am thinking that you drink lots of wine during the holiday. (...) Because that's when she [mom] thinks it's fine because [then] she can enjoy herself.'* (Tora). Some also described how parents had turned wine consumption into a hobby: *'My dad likes it. He loves wine, but he doesn't get drunk like that. But he likes it so much that he decided to make a wine cellar.'* (Veronica). The reference to high-brow wine culture, where taste and quality are pivotal, is obvious in this latter quote, and contrasts with the intoxication-oriented drinking of adolescents.

The distinction between adult and adolescent drinking was made apparent in most descriptions of why young people drink: *'Most people drinking like that in ninth grade don't drink because it's good, they drink to get drunk.'* (Nils). Part of the concept of being drunk is feeling superior and experiencing sudden changes of emotions and behaviour:



*Sebastian: [Adults] like the taste of wine and such. (...) While adolescents, on the other hand, at least here in Norway, they have a culture where getting drunk is something cool and entertaining and good.*

*I: So you think that adolescents drink to be cool, while adults drink because they like it?*

*Sebastian: Yes, and maybe because some young people think it's fun how the world suddenly gets turned upside down when they are drunk and happy.*

Alcohol was frequently described as resulting in a change of personality for adolescents, because they got drunk. The young adolescents described how other adolescents were motivated to drink in order to experience this change. While admitting that having fun was an important motivation for adolescents to drink, the young adolescents usually talked about this with great concern, thereby drawing a moral boundary between themselves and older adolescent drinkers (Lamont & Molnár 2002).

Another important reason for youthful drinking that came up in the interviews was peer pressure. Randi stated that adolescents drink because ‘(...) *they are curious and want to be cool and such.*’ They also described adolescent drinking as something forced, distinguishing it from the autonomous, taste-oriented drinking among adults:

*It's kind of what you have to do to be a part of the group. There are lots of people experiencing such pressure. If you want to be one of the cool people, then you need to just start doing it – to try alcohol and do stuff you don't want to then. (Susanne)*

Here, drinking is closely linked to attempts to improve social standing among peers. Research shows that alcohol can be used to signal maturity among young people, hence representing a passage to adulthood (Demant & Järvinen 2006; Beccaria & Sande 2003). Despite the sharp distinctions drawn between adult and adolescent drinking, the young adolescents did make certain connections between youthful peer pressure and pursuing adult status. The latter was merely described as a feeling:

*I: Why do young people drink?*

*Frank: Cause they want to be cool.*

*I: They want to be cool.*

*Jonas: They want to feel grown up.*

*Gunnar: Mostly to feel grown up, and to be a part of the coolest people at school.*

Peer pressure was commonly mentioned as one of the main reasons for drinking among adolescents. As such, the fear of being considered an outsider or uncool was central to the young adolescents' understanding of why many started drinking in their teenage years. This confirms a widespread image of children and adolescents as being without individuality and agency (O'Connell-Davidson 2005). Adults, on the other hand, were described as having more agency when deciding to drink. Their motivations included taste and individual enjoyment of alcohol, and not conforming to group expectations. In the cases where structural factors were mentioned as motivations for adult drinking, these were usually alcoholism, not peer pressure.

#### *Amount of alcohol*

In the young adolescents' accounts, motivations for drinking were closely connected with the amounts of alcohol consumed on every drinking occasion. Many of the participants stated that adolescents do not really like the taste of alcohol, and that they only drink to get drunk. This suggests that young people consume more alcohol on each drinking occasion than adults. Descriptions of binge drinking were combined with representations of adolescent drinkers as irrational. In the following quote, Tora explains how intoxication turns adolescents into 'animals':

*When we celebrated New Year's Eve, I think it was two years ago, there were some tenth graders who had a party. They were going to light up some fireworks and then one of the drunk ones went to eat grass.*

Consuming large amounts of alcohol was also linked to acute, medical problems:

*Yes, there was this one guy at school about a year ago, or I think it's two years ago now, that had picked up [alcohol] at his dad's place. Then he drank so much that he had to go to the hospital to vomit it all up. (William)*

Drinking stories, such as these, clearly provide opportunities for exploration of rebellious identities (Tutenges & Rod 2009), but they can also convey moral arguments about the

dangers of alcohol. Young adolescents in this study recounted many stories of how drinking posed great health risks, involving adolescents that drank too much:

*Stian: It was this one guy in ninth grade, Egon, he stole 96%-liquor from his dad and got really, really drunk and was laying around in the ditch. I think he had like 3 in blood-alcohol level. He almost died.*

*I: That's heavy...*

*Sebastian: I heard about two girls that were walking. I think it was in my brother's class. A couple of years ago. I don't have a clue about where they got the liquor from, but they drank the liquor and they got so cold and almost froze to death actually (...).*

The young adolescents further underscored that young people like themselves did not have sufficient experience to control their alcohol intake, nor did their bodies handle it as well as adult bodies:

*Yeah, it is kind of different because the body of an adult handles alcohol a lot better than a child's [body]. Like, it is dangerous for children under 10 years old. Then it is really dangerous to drink. (Brita)*

While the young adolescents mentioned some positive social effects of alcohol, such as being included in a group or getting to know more people, they emphasized the dangers and risks of adolescent drinking more. Adults, on the other hand, were perceived as reasonable drinkers, often due to their longer life experience:

*Stian: Well, my dad can just have a glass of cognac on Fridays watching TV. But that's it.*

*Sebastian: But then he is an adult and done running around partying and drinking.*

The young adolescents described how adults could enjoy a glass of wine or beer in a peaceful environment without getting drunk:

*Trond: Maybe adults drink just to enjoy themselves with one glass. That's totally fine, because you don't get drunk out of that.*

*Roald: But not if you drink a lot of wine. Or I mean, that they don't drink a lot of wine. Just one glass, during the weekend, or maybe drink one beer.*

Although the main categorization was drawn between the major social entities of adults and adolescents, the young adolescents also drew finer lines between familiar and unfamiliar people. The general conception was that adults drink smaller amounts and remain in self-control, but the adults in these cases were usually the participants' own parents or close family. Adults at a greater social distance could sometimes be described as drunk, alcoholics, and out of control. While drunkenness was expected in adolescence, adult intoxication came across as a greater social deviation. Drunk adults were portrayed as particularly scary, something this image of an a child molester clearly illustrates:

*But if they drink like crazy they become all crazy. (...) So like, if there is a man, he can just rape a twelve year old without knowing it himself. And the next day he gets caught having [raped someone] without knowing what he did. (Inga)*

Despite stories of drunk and/or alcoholic adult strangers, the main image conveyed was one where adult drinking was completely different from youthful drinking, or as Trude put it: 'Adults are more in control than young people'. In this image of drinking, two different groups of meaning are clearly separated from each other (Zerubavel 1991). As for motivations for drinking, adults and adolescents differed greatly in levels of agency and control, something that both led to, and was reinforced by, the consumption of large amounts of alcohol.

#### *Context of drinking*

In the young adolescents' accounts, the social context for drinking also differed between adults and adolescents. The context for teenage drinking was frequently described as parties, such as school proms, nightlife settings, or at home with friends:

*One time when I was at home with a friend, my older brother had a party and he said there were only 2-3 friends coming. Then many people came and they had quite a lot of alcohol and many of them got drunk (...) (Guro)*

Smaller gatherings at home did not always end up the way they intended, something also Susanne had learned from her older sister:

*(...) she is 16 and they party a lot. She had a party at our house. It didn't really go as planned, cause so many people came and it was all out of control. And our mom and dad weren't home. Then the police came and lots of things got stolen. We won't do that again, to put it that way.*

In contrast to the parties that got out of hand, the contexts for adult drinking were described as weekends at home or special occasions. One group of boys discussed their first thoughts of alcohol in this way:

*Ulf: I think about Friday nights, because then my mum always has a glass of wine. Friday-coziness.*

*William: My parents rarely drink.*

*Ulf: Mine neither, only Friday nights.*

*Viktor: Yes, mine drink sometimes. Like if it's someone's birthday, like an anniversary. People they know, a wedding or something.*

Meals were also important occasions for adults to drink: *'My mom drinks some weekends, not every weekend. Just to have a good time when people are visiting and stuff. Such as wine with the food'* (Elin). Meals are social situations that, especially during weekends, often involve other people visiting. This makes for a good occasion to have a glass of wine or a beer:

*Yeah, my dad drinks a glass of wine when he is visiting someone or something. Or sometimes with dinner or during weekends. If the food is good. So it happens a couple times a month that he has one glass. (Arvid)*

Other adult drinking occasions were festivities, such as Christmas: *'My mom (...) only drinks Christmas Eve or something. In a cup.'* In all these situations, the image conveyed was one of adults enhancing a time of enjoyment with a small amount of alcohol.

As for motivations and amounts, perspectives on the social context for drinking divide adolescents and adults in two distinct social categories (Zerubavel 1991). This is probably closely linked to the young adolescents' own lives. They have first-hand experiences of adults

drinking a glass of wine or a bottle of beer. Seemingly, the participants accepted the adults' reasons for drinking, with a general conception that adults – at least the ones they are familiar with – know what they are doing. The context for adolescent drinking, on the other hand, is at a greater social distance. Lacking the same personal experiences, they base their talk on widely circulated stories. A characteristic of these stories is the strong emphasis on risk factors related to adolescent drinking. Herein lay symbolic boundaries that play an important role in the young adolescents' identity work (Lamont & Molnár 2002).

#### Symbolic boundaries against adolescent drinkers

When young adolescents argue that adolescents should not drink because they are immature, lacking agency and control, they are degrading a category of people they are in the early process of being – namely adolescents. This is highly unusual when it comes to social identity work, and can only be understood in the light of how the young adolescents did not see themselves as part of a group of *young drinkers*. The aversion participants showed for adolescent drinkers was implicit in all the distinctions between adolescent and adult drinking described above. Inherent in the constructed divisions between adults and adolescents was a moral self that belonged to neither of the social categories. The presentations of such a self rely on them actively participating in symbolic boundary work (Presser 2004; Lamont & Molnar 2002).

The participants often dissociated themselves from adolescents drinking alcohol, as illustrated by this discussion:

*Mats: I can understand adults doing it for a nice dinner, but otherwise.*

*Ivar: I don't understand why anyone does it. It doesn't taste any good, or it depends. If they are drinking regular beer.*

*Nils: No, but most people drinking in ninth grade don't drink because it's good - they drink to get drunk.*

*Johannes: Hehe.*

*Mats: Yeah.*

*I: Yes. So what do you think about that?*

*Nils: It's a bit strange. You don't drink stuff to get drunk.*

*Halvor: Many say that it tastes terrible.*

They could hardly imagine that someone would drink larger amounts of something that did not taste good. This emphasis on bad taste was common, and seemed to come from their own tasting experiences:

*I: What about alcohol, what are you thinking about then?*

*Erling: That it tastes like shit.*

*I: So you have tasted it?*

*Erling: I had some of my dad's wine one time. I have also tasted some beer. And beer tastes really terrible [makes a "nasty"-sound]. Then I have tasted alcohol-free beer, and that also tastes like dishwater. I have tasted different white wines and red wines too. Anything with alcohol does not taste good.*

According to the young adolescents in this study, drinking something they did not like the taste of only to get drunk, was 'strange'. Thus, drinking was clearly a marker of who they were not. By identifying a social cluster they did not belong to, they simultaneously spoke volumes about who they considered themselves to be (Zerubavel 1991). One thing they were not was childish, like adolescent drinkers:

*(...) Young people only drink because it's supposed to be cool. They are trying to act tough in front of groups of guys or girls. That they kind of "yes, we are drinking and we are really cool". That was how it was earlier but now, at least in our grade and maybe ninth grade as well, they have started to think that it is really childish to stand there trying to be tough by drinking. (Bente)*

Bente is clearly distancing herself from adolescent drinkers, calling them 'they'. She also explains how things have changed among the youngest in middle school, who now look at drinking as a childish act. This is also mentioned by Josefine after she was asked about what the class thought of an incident where two boys from their grade drank alcohol during school hours: '*[The class] didn't think it was very mature of them. That they were just trying to be cool that way*'. Being mature was viewed as a positive characteristic that did not fit young drinkers, but instead captured their own group of non-drinkers.

Through the process of comparing and contrasting, the young adolescents in this study constructed positive identities for themselves (Lamont 2002). This symbolic boundary work is well illustrated in the following labelling of adolescent drinkers and their friends as ‘stupid’:

*I: What about young people? (...) Why do they drink alcohol?*

*Daniel: Because they have some stupid friends that make them do it.*

*Aksel: Yes.*

*Arvid: They are stupid.*

Classifying adolescent drinkers as being without agency (they drink because their friends make them do it) is an effective way of demonstrating an alternative self with agency – and also a social network without ‘stupid friends’. The strong opposition they had towards adolescent drinkers were further demonstrated when they described a scenario where their friends started drinking:

*I: If you imagine a situation, a party or something. And your friends were drinking alcohol. What do you think you would do then?*

*Inga: I would just go home. I don't want to be there if they started drinking.*

*Dina: I think I would just grab [the alcohol], throw it away and say “you brat”.*

Their opinions about alcohol were so strong that, if their friends changed from the non-drinking to the drinking category, they claimed that they would reject them. Many of the participants could not picture themselves drinking. Kjersti said that: ‘*I cannot imagine myself starting to drink now*’ and Linda stated that ‘*it's not something I will start doing*’. Eskil came with a longer explanation for why he would not drink:

*Eskil: I don't know how other people are, but I don't get affected as much by the class and such. I kind of don't care. There has been some drinking (...) but I have never joined them. And I'm not planning to either.*

*I: Why not?*

*Eskil: Cause alcohol is very dangerous. And they add sweet things to it that are no good. And when you are too young, right, you will just go to a party and get completely drunk, having no control. I heard rumours about one guy that put his shoes*



*on his hands and walked home. That doesn't sound tempting to me. It's not tempting to have a head like a fool.*

Others were less determined, and opened up for drinking in a social context far removed from what they associated with adolescent drinkers:

*I don't think I want to taste it either, because I think it smells weird and stuff. I at least don't want to taste it at a party. If I will have a taste, when I am big enough, then I will start tasting it at my parents. But I don't really want to taste it. At least never taste it at a youth party. (Anne)*

By removing drinking from the social context of partying, stressing a soft 'tasting' approach, it was easier for the young adolescents to foresee drinking at a later stage. Some allowed the possibility of this coming sooner, but then conveniently talked about unspecified others:

*Stian: Time comes so suddenly, so it's not easy to say.*

*Sebastian: Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if some people [in their class] would get drunk.*

*I: During tenth grade?*

*Sebastian: Eh, maybe already in ninth grade, but most likely in tenth grade.*

According to themselves, the young adolescents in this study were too young to drink. Nicolas for example stated that '*One sip is one too much. When you are as young as we are.*' This often led them to distance themselves from the adolescents who were drinking. Still, unlike young teetotalers in other studies (Bogren 2006), the young adolescents somehow realized that things were about to change, revealing an uncertainty about the future common to adolescents (Nilsen 1999). Although they fiercely rejected adolescent drinking, the symbolic boundaries they drew with adolescent drinkers were fragile, and in a process of transformation. As a start, they identified more with adult drinking practices than with what they categorized as out-of-control, youthful drinking.

## Discussion

This study reflects findings in other studies of the negative attitudes towards alcohol among young adolescents (Jayne & Valentine 2015; Eadie et al. 2010). Norwegian 12-13 years old were particularly critical towards adolescents who drank, but also towards drunkenness in general. The difference between adolescents and adults was the most important classificatory schema when the young adolescents struggled to understand and make sense of alcohol use (see also Beccaria & Sande 2003; Katainen & Rolando 2015; Rolando, Törrönen & Beccaria 2014). Adults were seen as competent to drink, while adolescents were described as opposing formal and informal drinking norms and developing a dangerous youthful drinking culture. Young adolescents clearly distinguished between adolescent and adult drinking, mainly along the lines of motivation for drinking, amount drunk, and the social context of drinking. Age and status are important for determining drinking styles (Harnett et al. 2000). This study shows that these factors are also crucial to understand how drinking practices are evaluated by young people.

Alcohol is often used to signal maturity among young people and drinking may be viewed as a rite of passage into adulthood (Demant & Järvinen 2006; Beccaria & Sande 2003). Young adolescents largely incorporated society's dominant understanding when portraying adolescents as lacking sufficient self-control to consume alcohol in a responsible way. This can make them appear 'childish' and thus be problematic in terms of social identity. Participants in this study solved this possible dilemma by active symbolic boundary work against young drinkers. Adolescents that drank alcohol were portrayed as childish, stupid, and subject to peer pressure. Hence, agency and independence was not demonstrated by drinking alcohol, but by acknowledging that adolescents (including themselves) were better off avoiding alcohol. Self-control is an important factor in considering when (and for whom) drinking is considered acceptable (Katainen & Rolando 2015). By actively excluding themselves from the group of competent drinkers, the young adolescents came across as mature and responsible (Fine 2004). Aged 12-13, the young adolescents did not accept the idea of drinking alcohol as signalling maturity. Instead, they aimed for maturity by distancing themselves from alcohol and silly, drunk adolescent behaviour.

Social networks play an important role in deciphering risk and deciding social appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Through interacting with other people, conceptions of risks are created as a 'socially interactive enterprise' (Rhodes 1997). Entering high school (16-19 years) from middle school (12-16 years) is a key transition for adolescents, and it is expected that things will change when they are faced with new peer groups (Kinney 1993).

Social identities rest on social relations (Jenkins 1996), and in the case of young adolescents, the formation of social identity will increasingly be related to interaction in peer groups. At the time of the interviews, the young adolescents perceived drinking as risky behaviour for the young and expressed a will to continue as teetotallers even as adults. At the same time, they acknowledged that they were in a process of transformation, implicitly suggesting alterations to their stance on alcohol in the not so distant future.

In this article, we have explored how young Norwegian adolescents regard drinking situations and their own place in them. We argue that young adolescents largely approached questions of alcohol socially and relationally. They applied well-established social categories and engaged in symbolic boundary work against groups in close social proximity to appear as functional and mature (Copes, Hochstetler & Williams 2008). In particular, the dichotomy of adolescents versus adults was central in young adolescents' perceptions of drinking. As they grow older, and drinking becomes more common in their peer groups, this understanding of alcohol will be challenged and social identities and drinking practices will alter accordingly. One important aim for research in this field should be to follow young adolescents through this transition longitudinally. In this way, research can explore how, where and in what ways these changes take place and if there is difference between previous generations and this one. It is especially interesting to see if adolescents start identifying as adults or if they instead introduce other relevant categories and symbolic boundaries to understand and gradually justify drinking.

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