

“Man up!”: discursive constructions of non-drinkers among UK undergraduates

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This study adopted a discursive approach to explore how not drinking alcohol (non-drinking) is construed in relation to masculine identity among 12 undergraduate interviewees. Three prominent discourses were revealed. First, non-drinking was constructed as something strange requiring explanation. Second, contradictory discourses constructed non-drinking as, simultaneously, unsociable yet reflective of greater sociability. Third, non-drinking was constructed as something which has greater negative social consequences for men than for women. Opportunities for challenging traditional gender role expectations are considered.

Key words: Alcohol, Discourse, Gender, Masculinity, Student

Drinking in social contexts is considered to be a key feature of British culture (Plant & Plant, 2006; van Wersch & Walker, 2009) and of the social lives of most university students (McAlaney & McMahon, 2007). However, there is reason for concern about university students' alcohol consumption because excessive alcohol consumption is linked to poor health outcomes and anti-social behaviour in this group (Crawford & Flint, 2009; Kerr, Fillmore & Marvy, 2000). Furthermore, the incidence of heavy episodic drinking is more common among undergraduate students (43-52%) than the general population than among the general young adult population (24-32%) of 16-24 year olds (Bewick, Mulhern, Barkham, Trusler, Hill & Stiles, 2008; Drinkaware, 2009; Gill, 2002; Public Health Agency, 2010).

#### *Gendered aspects of drinking*

Compared with women, men are more likely to drink, to engage in heavy episodic drinking, and to experience alcohol-related harm (White et al., 2011). In recent years, sex differences in drinking and heavy drinking appear to have narrowed, particularly among young adults (Keyes, Grant & Hasin, 2008). However, while the drinking behaviour of young women and

its perception by others has changed considerably in recent history (e.g. Lyons, 2009; Lyons & Willott, 2008), culturally-entrenched gender stereotypes for heavy drinking persist (e.g., de Visser & McDonnell, 2012; Mahalik, Burns & Syzdek, 2007).

Heavy alcohol consumption has traditionally been considered to be a masculine behaviour (e.g., Gaughan, 2006; Mullen, Watson, Swift & Black, 2007). It has been argued that men can behave so as to develop and display their masculine identity in a social context where masculine and feminine tend to be considered polar opposites (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Of relevance here is Connell's (1987; 2005) theory of multiple masculinities which suggests that men's identity is greatly dependent on their complicity with or resistance to *hegemonic* (dominant) forms of masculinity. Such hegemonic formulations of masculinity are recognizable in behaviours that allow men to assert their dominance within the gender relations hierarchy. Courtenay (2000) argued that health-related behaviours are important resources for displaying such hegemonic masculinities, and subsequent research has indicated how men use health-related behaviours to display and define their masculinity (de Visser, Smith & McDonnell, 2009; Sloan, Gough & Conner, 2010). In particular, patterns of alcohol use have been identified as key elements of discourses of masculinity and experiences of being masculine (de Visser & Smith, 2007; Gough & Edwards, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Recent revisions of Connell's theoretical proposals have discussed the importance of acknowledging how both hegemonic femininities *and* masculinities are implicated in the psycho-sociology of gender relations and gendered practices (e.g. Schippers, 2007). This implies that any investigation concerning health-relevant behaviours relevant to masculinity or femininity should include evidence derived from participants of each sex, should explore issues surrounding the health behaviour of both sexes and should be discussed in connection to issues involved in gender relations more broadly. Heavy alcohol consumption may be

intimately linked to gender identity at both peer-interaction and societal levels of understanding and in both real and imagined terms.

It is important to understand how masculinities are employed and enacted when accounting for harmful drinking behaviour, and when accounting for the behaviour of men who do resist stereotypical gender role expectations (de Visser & Smith, 2007). An extreme sense in which stereotype resistance might be understood to occur would be not drinking alcohol and, in this way, forgoing an important channel for constructing and maintaining masculine identity. A closer consideration of the links between non-drinking and masculinity might provide fresh insights into how harmful drinking behaviour among young men is enacted and normalised.

#### *Non-drinking literature*

British non-drinkers aged 16-24 represent a substantial minority within this age group with 19% of men and 22% of women have either never drank or had not drunk alcohol in the preceding year (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2010). Given the common association of heavy episodic drinking with youth and masculinity, non-drinkers are an interesting focus of psychological research. Several areas of research into non-drinking can be identified. One approach focuses on identifying why individuals do not drink (Epler, Sher & Piasecki, 2009; Huang, DeJong, Schneider & Towvim, 2011). Some qualitative research has explored how different aspects of being experienced by others as ‘a non-drinker’ are dealt with and how drinking contexts are ‘managed’ by non-drinkers (Piacentini & Banister, 2009; Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010). Notably, Piacentini and Banister’s (2009) data suggested that female non-drinkers may adopt more socially resourceful (e.g. mutually supportive) coping strategies to resist social stigma than the more avoidant strategies (e.g. enduring others’ drunken behaviour despite experiencing situational distress) adopted by male abstainers. Evidence here also suggests that resolution to an unorthodox lifestyle decision made available

to young non-drinkers a particular kind of pride, self-confidence and individuality (Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010).

Research in the social-cognitive tradition has demonstrated that the relative favourability of the prototypical alcohol abstainer among young people can predict alcohol consumption (Gerrard, Gibbons, Reis-Bergan, Trudeau, Lune & Buunk, 2002; Zimmerman & Sieverding, 2010). In one study, men who expressed more negative evaluations and greater dissimilarity with the typical non-drinker drank more excessively (Zimmerman & Sieverding, 2010). Other authors report correlations between harmful drinking and negative attitudes towards non-drinkers and have emphasised how non-drinking jeopardizes ‘fitting in’ with same-age peers (Regan & Morrison, 2011). This research indicates that perceptions of alcohol abstainers are associated with harmful drinking patterns via unclear mechanisms and that this influence may be more powerful among men. An exploratory analysis of how meanings relevant to non-drinking are discussed and used discursively in relation to gender role expectations represents a current gap in the literature.

In addition to insights from theories of gender and health (Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000), insights from social psychological identity theories may help to explain the social construction of non-drinking. For example, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) argues that strong distinctions between a valued in-group and less-valued outgroups are important to a coherent sense of identity. This may help to explain distinctions made among young people between “sociable” drinkers and “unsociable” non-drinkers (e.g. Regan & Morrison, 2011). It may also help to explain men who eschew dominant discourses of masculinity or are unsuccessful in stereotypically masculine domains may be denigrated more generally and subject to broader accusations about their masculinity. For example, it has been noted that heterosexual men who deviate from male norms, for example, those individuals who enact “feminine” roles (e.g., nursing), or fail in “masculine” domains unrelated to

sexuality (e.g., sport or drinking) may be labeled a “fag” or “poof” (de Visser et al, 2009; Pascoe, 2005; Williams, 1995).

The current study was designed to explore the discursive construction of non-drinking and non-drinkers to elucidate how non-drinking is maintained within cultural understandings (e.g., Burr, 2003) and the normative implications of these construals for young men. A qualitative approach was warranted given the investigative focus on examining forms of discursive practice evident in speech and text. Following Seidler’s (1997) ‘self and other’ dichotomies, it was anticipated that constructions of male non-drinkers may strive to achieve particular discursive goals, reflecting two levels of ‘deviance’ through firstly, rejecting drinking as a widespread social custom among young people and secondly, rejection of alcohol as a key device for asserting masculine identity. It was expected that there would be more moderate consequences of non-drinking for women than for men. Individual interviews were chosen in preference to focus group discussions; partly on account of the complex nature of the subject matter and partly to minimize responses given under conditions of social pressure. It was important to include interviewees of both sexes, and conversations about male and female drinking behaviour with both men and women, for two reasons. Firstly, it is reasoned that to understand the gendered nature of any phenomena then the opinions and experiences of both men and women should be investigated. Secondly, recent increases in alcohol consumption among young women holds consequences for a dominant conception of alcohol as associated with men and maleness, making it an activity and practice of arguably equivalent significance to female and male students in modern times. The following analysis is intended to explicate social constructions relevant to masculinity and non-drinking.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Interviews were conducted with 12 undergraduates aged 20 to 29 years. Participation requirements included being 18+ and an alcohol consumer (identified via the question “do you regularly consume (e.g. weekly) alcoholic drinks?” in recruitment correspondence). As issues of gender are articulated by, and relevant to, either sex, both male ( $N = 7$ ) and female ( $N = 5$ ) respondents were interviewed. All participants described themselves as ‘English’ and were from the south of England. Participants were not asked to describe the ethnicity of their family background, but all participants except one were white. Thus, participants could reasonably be expected to have access to similar discursive resources. Individuals were approached directly from campus locations (e.g., cafés), and were given an information sheet. Ethical approval was obtained from the host institution. Interviewees were paid £7 for participating in the study. Prior to interviews written informed consent was obtained.

#### *Procedure*

All interviews were semi-structured, lasted 45-70 minutes and were held in a quiet campus room with only interviewer and interviewee present. The interviewer was male, white and in his early thirties. Attempts were made to formulate questions using non-directive and assumption-free language where possible and several explored reasonably general topics including; ‘non-drinkers’ (e.g. “what is your experience of the presence of non-drinkers within during student drinking occasions?”) and ‘gender and alcohol’ (e.g. “what comes to mind when you think about (wo)men and drinking?”). Throughout interviews, efforts were made to guide discussion with language supplied by participants. Debriefing involved an explanation of the study rationale and an opportunity for participants to raise questions.

Interviews were transcribed following Jefferson transcription notation (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) with participant names and any identifying information replaced with pseudonyms. During debrief, efforts were made to acknowledge any emotional or practical implications of the discussion while appropriate support options were discussed in the case of one

interviewee. Notably, three female and two male participants stated that the interview had provided the opportunity to talk about relevant life issues which would have been unlikely to occur in day-to-day conversations.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Emphasis was given to a Foucaultian reading of transcripts (e.g. Willig, 2008): with an emphasis on identifying and accounting for the functional aspects (e.g. subject positions, practice options) stemming from participant constructions of non-drinking. However, attention was also given to recognising discursive features of participant-interviewer rhetorical activity (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Analysis proceeded in three stages broadly corresponding with Willig's (2008) guidelines. Specifically, this involved: (i) reading and re-reading of transcripts to understand the range of discursive constructions with specific excerpts highlighted for closer analysis where closely-related to non-drinking and masculinity; (ii) grouping excerpts into broad aspects (e.g. excerpts to 'men and drinking' and 'men and non-drinking' were grouped separately according to the discourses to which they were felt to reflect); (iii) re-reading interview scripts in the light of central, emerging aspects and identifying the action orientation, subject positions and possibilities for practice and subjectivity enabled by such positions. Study findings are discussed in terms of three discursive patterns which are illustrated with representative excerpts. The first, 'non-drinking as something strange requiring explanation' focuses on how non-drinking, as an atypical lifestyle choice, is understood and the kind of bearing this has on the assimilation of non-drinkers within drinking contexts. The second: 'non-drinking as simultaneously unsociable yet reflecting greater sociability' presents contradictory construals of the sociability of abstinence. Features of a third discourse which constructed non-drinkers as something that holds greater negative consequences for men than for women are also presented.

### *1. Non-drinking as something strange requiring explanation*

A common way in which non-drinkers were constructed reflected a discourse involving curiosity about an individual's reasons for not drinking, and speculation over the situational implications of non-drinking in contexts where alcohol is consumed. This is evident in two extracts below:

Tina: I haven't really thought about it before (.) so it's been quite nice to think like (.) about this non-drinking thing (.) it seems a bit alien, doesn't it?

Andy: It'll be like "why are you not joining in, why are you like excluding yourself?" (.) form of exclusion or erm (.) is it due to your religion your beliefs or (.) and then you start to question "Well why, why aren't you? (.) why don't you want to be with us (.) the in-group? (.) Why do you want to alienate (.) I dunno, to an extent possibly alienate yourself because y'know you're not doing what we're doing". I dunno (.) I mean again I've never thought about it like this.

Both Tina and Andy constructed non-drinking using other-worldly expressions, regarding the behaviour itself ("a bit alien") and its self-fulfilling consequences ("to alienate"). In this way, constructions of non-drinking present it as a behaviour at odds with the social context in which it exists. Participants also responded to non-drinkers' sense of difference, evident in the excerpt below:

Penny: I think it'd be quite difficult if you were someone who just isn't a drinker like someone who doesn't drink ever (.) ever (.) so that's quite (.) yeah I've got big respect for that really (.)

Int: um-hmm (.) I mean do you have a sense that that's common really? (.) commonly? (.) I mean is there a common sense of respect in a student population? Do you think that's common?

Penny: in a way respect but in a way like but (.) in a way you're probably more likely to distance yourself from someone like that as well

While some degree of social desirability might be attributed to her description of non-drinkers as individuals warranting “big respect”, Penny employed contradictory constructions which simultaneously offered approval of non-drinking as a lifestyle choice while indicating that non-drinkers might be deliberately avoided in social settings. This produced an ultimately ambivalent construal of non-drinking, with non-drinkers constructed, as individuals’ who commandeer respect, yet should also be kept at some social distance.

The presence of non-drinkers in male drinking contexts was also understood in relation to sexual pursuit. Here, two excerpts from Lindsay’s interview constructed male abstainers as having a useful functional role within male friendship groups on a drinking night out:

Lindsay: guys like that [non-drinkers] I tend to sort of find them (.) well don’t find actually (.) I would stereotype them maybe is probably the right word, as going out to hit on girls or something maybe (.) to use each other like wing-men and stuff like that right ...?

Lindsay: maybe the they [non-drinkers] would be a little more sensible, but then I see guys who (.) more often than not would be erm (.) more outgoing than girls anyway so (.) maybe not being drunk (.) wouldn’t have a huge difference? (.) I don’t know really (.) I mean they’re still going to go out and enjoy stuff if they’re not drunk (.) even in the clubs I think maybe they can be the wing-man.

Lindsay endowed non-drinkers with distinct situational roles reflecting collective social interests within male friendship groups; in this case, as “wing-men” who seek-out potential female partners as part of a collective male heterosexual pursuit of women in club settings. Male drinkers may become accepting of male non-drinkers where their sober presence might stand to advantage all male group members (i.e. through their identifying and approaching

potential female partners). Through such actions, male non-drinkers might be in a position to recover lost ‘masculine capital’ (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012) within social contexts involving alcohol consumption and with male friendships at stake. Significantly, Lindsay pointed to role expectations of non-drinkers “even in clubs” and therefore even in situations where alcohol consumption might be expected from all patrons. Such constructions can be considered in the light of other research where ‘masculine capital’ is described as a social trading commodity (de Visser et al, 2009; de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). Examining Lindsay’s construction; non-drinkers might be interpreted as compensating for non-masculine behaviour in one domain (e.g. alcohol consumption) by asserting it in another (e.g. sexual pursuit of women) while ultimately remaining subordinate to male drinkers. Interestingly, no male participants referred to ‘wing men’ or equivalent roles for non-drinkers within social occasions.

## *2. Non-drinking as something unsociable but also reflecting greater sociability.*

In line with findings from previous quantitative research (Regan & Morrison, 2011) there was a tendency for participants to construct non-drinkers as boring or socially disengaged. Specifically, perceptions of a diminished sociability of non-drinking were constructed in relation to a ‘social commitment’ discourse by Sarah below:

Sarah: it can be kind of awkward if someone won’t drink at all almost (.) that sounds

(.) way too negative (.) wasn’t what I meant to (.) yeah

Int: okay so there’s something there about people who are drinking how (.) umm (.)

Sarah: kind of adapting to the social situation almost? (.) like moderate drinkers yeah

(.) adapt to the social situation whereas non-drinkers it’s kind of a definite  
choice they won’t join us at all (.)

Int: okay and that links back to what you said at the beginning that it’s like almost  
a decision (.) that non-drinkers make rather than umm (.)

Sarah: yeah like don't really feel (.) that's fine (.) like in no situation ever will I drink  
(.)

Here, Sarah spoke of non-drinking as 'kind of a definite choice that they won't join us at all', and in doing so constructs non-drinking as an intractable withholding of social immersion during occasions where individual consumption levels are expected to match the group rate. She also indicated the subjective impact of the 'presence' of this behavioural decision, as embodied by non-drinkers, on other group members ("it can be kind of awkward"). In this extract moderate drinkers were directly juxtaposed with non-drinkers; the former (who 'adapt to the social situation') clearly viewed more positively than the latter (who uphold 'a definite choice'). However, one notable break from this trend was evident in Andy's interview, where he problematised common-sense notions of 'sociable':

Andy: I mean this is going a bit deeper then but (.) you could even say probably less social (.) you could umm (.) or maybe more social actually because you don't need the alcohol to umm (.) to social [sic] with people (.) it can work both ways (.) I mean I look at people who don't drink alcohol, to be honest, as the lucky ones when I go out (.) y'know they're the ones (.) y'know I know a very few who they'll go out and they'll drink juice and (.) some of them actually they'll cheat they'll drink red bull which is even worse if not just as bad (.) y'know you drink five or six of those man and it's a lot of taurine and (.) sugar and caffeine y'know that's a drug in itself (.) but if you don't drink any y'know just juice or (.) y'know they're the lucky ones they don't need a stimulant already to have fun (.) it's all in there already it's in their heads

Int: OK that's interesting.

Andy: So maybe they are the more social ones the non-drinkers.

Intriguingly, although he commenced by describing non-drinkers as less sociable because of their failure to join in with a group activity, Andy then switched to describing non-drinkers as “more social” than alcohol consumers with statements such as “it’s all in there already in their heads”. Andy appeared to be suggesting that abstainers are more sociable or more socially competent than drinkers because they can be sufficiently stimulated and confident to enjoy social experiences without needing alcohol. This discursive move curiously positions non-drinkers as, enviably “more social” by virtue of their ability to socialize successfully without using alcohol: they are “the lucky ones”.

Elsewhere, non-drinking was constructed as something holding significant social/friendship penalties for male drinkers, evident in Mike’s extract below:

Mike: The thing that would make [non-drinking] less appealing to me is (.) the fear that my friends who I drink with would think that I was in some way rejecting a shared value (.) that we have (.)

Int: Hm-hmm

Mike: And in rejecting a shared value that we have (.) that I would be rejecting my friendship with them (.) and that would be the worst thing

Int: Hm-hmm

Mike: And that would be the thing that I’d want least to err (.) want to give up (.) because that’s what makes people friends it’s not (.) it’s not so much necessarily that they drink together or that they enjoy specific things but that they have (.) they have a bunch of things that they hold to be valuable together (.) and with a lot of my friends, largely because I met my friends while drinking (.) we have a shared value in the value of (.) err (.) drinking alcohol as part of a social occasion

Int: Hm-hmm

Mike: If I went to meet them and I said “I’m not going to drink anymore” then they would (.) to put it in crude terms (.) they would think I had changed (.) right (.) and that I was no longer the person that they had become friends with (.) and so that would be the biggest down-side (.) and that for me is too big a down-side to (.) to lose the hang-overs over (.) I mean someone who wakes up in the morning feeling perfect and healthy and has nothing to look forward to in terms of seeing the friends and the friendships that they’d cultivated over (.) over fifteen or twenty years or whatever (.) so (.)

Here Mike emphasised the importance of drinking alcohol as a shared social activity enjoyed within friendship groups or as, going further still, something which “makes people friends”. Thus non-drinking was constructed by Mike in opposition to this shared social activity, such that rejection of alcohol would be tantamount to rejecting his friendship network. Excerpts here chime with literature concerning the role of alcohol in the discursive reproduction of masculine identities within male friendships (Gough & Edwards, 1998; Willott & Lyons, 2011). Mike highlighted the severe perceived implications of alcohol’s absence for existing and future friendships. Mike described some physical benefits from not drinking - i.e., waking up in the morning without a hangover and feeling “perfect and healthy” yet constructed any such benefits as basically irrelevant given the perceived costs of their acquisition: estrangement from established social networks. The above exchange illustrates the character and force of opposing subject positions realised via constructions of drinking as sociable and non-drinking as unsociable.

*3. Non-drinking as something which has greater negative social consequences for men than for women.*

It was notable that both male and female interviewees constructed implications of not drinking alcohol in binary opposition for men and women. Echoing evidence of from prior

qualitative research – Piacentini & Banister's (2009) female ‘mutually supportive strategies’ – Sarah described the compensatory processes in female friendship groups to ensure that abstainers are not excluded during drinking occasions using a similarly positive evaluation:

Sarah: I mean when I've been out with like (.) yeah people who don't drink (.) the girl who comes along who doesn't drink or whatever (.) then (.) someone normally doesn't drink with them or drinks less with them so they've got someone (.) so it's not just so separate almost (.) ‘cause it is kind of different if you're not drinking (.) like this kind of experience is different if you're not drinking

Int: OK (.) so something about sort of support there (.) we're not going to leave this person (.) behind?

Sarah: yeah so they don't feel so excluded almost? (.) ‘cause it is kind of a social thing isn't it (.) I mean if you've got a group of people who don't smoke and one person doesn't smoke (.) like they're all constantly going outside to smoke then (.) it's the same thing like going to the bar and dancing around like a mad person like if you're not drunk you're not really going to get very involved with that so (.) having someone yeah kind of not doing that with you makes the evening a lot more enjoyable as opposed to just making it a lot more separate I guess

By constructing non-drinkers as having a different kind of experience (her use of the term “not ... very involved” echoing the alienation described earlier), Sarah identified some potential difficulties that non-drinkers might experience in drinking context. This led to her suggestion that other group members may abstain for an evening to demonstrate solidarity and inclusiveness. Non-drinkers were constructed by Sarah as individuals whose non-drinking tests the robustness of a social groups' member inclusiveness. Interviewees elsewhere demarcated gendered boundaries more explicitly still; indicating contrasting construals of the differential gender role implications of non-drinking for men and women:

Tina: I don't actually know many men who don't drink so it's quite difficult (.) erm (.) maybe the woman's admired for it a little bit more (.) y'know if the woman doesn't drink it'd be like "Oh, good for her" y'know, she's looking after herself, she's not getting in silly situations but for a man it's like "Oh why are you not having a drink?" kind of "Man up!", kind of thing, y'know (.) so I think (.) I don't think this, I actually respect people who choose not to drink (.) 'cause it can completely mess you up but erm (.) I think there might be that kind of view there where it's more positively viewed for a woman whereas for a man it's not so much

In contrast to the positive constructions of female non-drinkers ("she's looking after herself") and possible evaluations of female non-drinking by others ("good for her"), male non-drinking here meets with incomprehension and unambiguous negative feedback ("Man up!"). The quote from Tina represents a view commonly expressed by participants concerning the risks to men's perceived masculinity associated with the decision to not drink. Here, traditional gender role boundaries are seen in opposition, with alcohol consumption constructed as something aligned and misaligned with masculine and feminine roles, respectively.

Through describing this discursive dichotomy, Tina empowers herself to *view* non-drinking as negative for men and positive for women, to *feel* uncomfortable with the idea of men abstaining and, ultimately, to *act* in commensurate ways by encouraging male non-drinkers to "man up". However, it should also be acknowledged that Tina's construction presents something of a double-edged sword whereby women consuming large amounts of alcohol may be vilified as *not* "looking after themselves" and are judged according to standards which do not apply to men (see de Visser & McDonnell, 2012).

Some interviewees expanded on the potential costs to masculinity associated with a man's decision not to drink. For example, Mike suggested that particular ways of being a man might be placed off-limits among alcohol abstainers. Mike described how alcohol-related knowledge could be employed by male drinkers as a means to assert cultural dominance:

Mike    Wine is something (.) when men drink wine, men don't generally drink white wine I think men generally prefer red wine (.) I know I prefer red wine (.) but also I think men have a sense of wanting to dominate the knowledge of wine (.) because wine is a whole world (.) sub-category of drinking (.) so y'know with a whole culture around it and men have to dominate that culture.

The male propensity to dominate "knowledge of wine" and in doing so "the whole culture around it" illustrates Mike's orientating toward a discursive route where hegemonic masculine identity, epitomized by 'the need to dominate', is visibly asserted. Mike's rhetorical approach enabled him to conceal potentially unsavoury aspects of hegemonic masculinity (i.e., "having to dominate") in behaviours that are not overtly domineering such as access to "the knowledge of wine". This offers a revised sense of how alcohol may be utilized when constructing masculine identity; with domination of 'wine' as a cultural knowledge category providing a format through which men might engage in behaviours which covertly enact hegemonic masculinity. This passage contains important implications for non-drinkers; suggesting how potentially successful, yet subtle, discursive means of exerting stereotypical features of male identity (e.g., domineering) are no longer accessible for abstainers.

Elsewhere in his interview, Mike expressed an opinion shared by many interviewees that not drinking alcohol exposes male abstainers to more serious challenges to the integrity of their masculine identity:

Mike: there are issues of (.) masculinity involved in (.) stamina (.) drinking stamina.  
there's a thing that (.) that we do (.) often friends that I drink with (.) if somebody  
goes home early - and we're all highly educated, liberal, anti-homophobic (.)  
ironists (.) ermm - but if somebody says they're going home early we'll go "ahh,  
he's going to be gay" (.) because like in a kind of err (.) in a deeply ironic  
knowing way (.) "Oh, what's happening such-and-such (.) why isn't such-and-  
such here tonight? (.) ahh, he's being gay (.) ahh, he's with his girlfriend tonight,  
he's so gay (.) so, he's not drinking with us (.) he's gonna be (.) he's being gay  
tonight." (.) so (.) and there's an element of masculinity involved in that

Int: OK (.) in terms of (.) upholding masculinity or...?

Mike: Yeah, I think what we're doing there is we're playing on the stereotype that a  
masculine, heterosexual man can drink more (.) and I think we're (.) I hope we're  
slightly undermining that stereotype but still also affirming that it's there  
[...]

We're simultaneously undermining the idea of drinking and masculinity (.) and  
buying into it at the same time (.) but we're buying into it for a specific reason  
which is because we would like to see our friend and we would like our friend's  
company.

While heavy drinking was constructed as important in both Mike and Penny's accounts,  
a clearer indication of the peer pressure and cultural expectations involved in male drinking  
occasions was evident in Mike's interview. By using labels intended to challenge  
heterosexual identity ("he's going to be gay"), Mike positioned himself and his drinking  
friends with intact masculinities in contrast to those who leave the drinking occasion. Several  
comments can be made about use of the term "gay" in this context. Other studies have noted

the tendency for non-masculine behaviour in domains unrelated to sexuality to be labelled “gay” or to prompt questions about homosexuality (de Visser et al., 2009). In this case, the pejorative use of the term is ironic given that spending time with one’s girlfriend is a display of heterosexuality. However, it has also been noted that the term “gay” may often be used without reference to sexuality, but simply to denote something or someone as inferior (Pascoe, 2005; Williams, 1995). Mike indicated how challenges to masculine identity provide a basis through which men legitimately intimidate each other to consume more alcohol. An example of stake inoculation (e.g., Potter & Wetherell, 1987) is evident at both the start (“we’re all highly educated, liberal, anti-homophobic ironists”) and ending (“we’re buying into it for a specific reason”) of Mike’s extract. By constructing himself as neither homophobic nor willing to place unreasonable constraints on personal liberties, Mike assumes a subject position where his awareness of cultural meanings justifies him teasing his friend without compromising his moral self-accountability. Mike’s expressed sentiments are consistent with Peralta’s (2007) recent qualitative research which demonstrated the social risks of male non-compliance with hegemonic expectations of alcohol consumption where abstainers were categorized as “two-beer queer[s]”; and a similar intention to derogate through equation with a group commonly constructed as an inferior social category (i.e., homosexuality). These findings also chime with recent Scottish research indicating how early midlife participants of *both* sexes experienced peer pressure to drink alcohol from men (Emslie, Hunt & Lyons, 2012); suggesting that peer pressure is not restricted to younger age groups. The risk of gender-based derogation must be successfully circumvented or challenged by men resisting social pressure to drink heavily.

## DISCUSSION

Analysis of semi-structured interviews with twelve participants demonstrated three broad discourses involving constructions of non-drinking, including its status as something: (i)

strange requiring explanation (ii) unsociable yet also reflective of greater sociability and (iii) holding greater negative social consequences for men than for women.

This research contributes to recent gender and alcohol field literature. Specifically, findings support prior evidence of the social challenges experienced by young non-drinkers in student contexts (Piacentini & Banister, 2009) and also how non-drinking may deplete, yet potentially uphold ‘masculine capital’ (de Visser et al., 2009). The current research also offers original, tentative insights into the contradictory status of non-drinking in terms of its construed sociability as a student lifestyle decision and how its social acceptability may differ for men and women.

The portrayal of abstainers as “alien” produced both derisory and envious subjectivities among alcohol consumers. Constructions indicating that male abstainers may experience exclusion from male drinking contexts are congruent with features of prior research that negative evaluations of non-drinkers influence consumption levels (Regan & Morrison, 2011) and are more predictive of intention to drink among men than women (Zimmerman & Sieverding, 2010). The current qualitative data may offer some explanation for this implication of non-drinker perceptions in male alcohol consumption patterns - via the evidence from Mark’s extract that men may associate non-drinking behaviour as something that carries significant social costs.

Similarly, discursive data strongly communicated how male social ties and emotional bonds may be threatened by non-drinking, with interviewees indicating how male abstainers’ masculine integrity could be contested by men and women alike. Findings here resonate with both a long-standing discursive focus on gender identity as a routine, recurring accomplishment and feature of situated conduct (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and also with the conclusions of recent experimental data which suggests how ‘precarious manhood’ involves an uncertain identity state requiring constant validation (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen,

Burnaford & Weaver, 2008). In this way, while present evidence suggests how male drinking contexts are non-permissive of male non-drinkers, interviewees also hinted at how restrictions imposed by ‘precarious male identity’ (Vandello et al., 2008) might be assuaged via alternative routes, such as assuming roles which facilitate collective male (sexual) interests (e.g. as “wing-man”). These findings can be considered alongside prior research as another example of how men bolster or defend threatened ‘masculine capital’ via varied social and recreational channels; e.g. possessing an impressive physical ‘build’ (de Visser et al, 2009) and team sports accomplishment (Peralta, 2007). Findings can be understood to broadly evidence Schippers’ (2007) revisionist theoretical discussion of *hegemonic gender relations*; e.g. where features of both masculinities and femininities are carefully negotiated by male non-drinkers (“wing-men”) in club contexts. By deploying behaviour explicitly symbolic of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. sexual predation) these non-drinkers may be seeking to redress their compromised position in the power relations of the gender hierarchy.

It is important to acknowledge that the (male) sex of the interviewer will have unavoidably influenced the co-construction of data with participants. Therein, it should be noted that analyses could be understood to reflect distinct ‘us–other’ transcript readings (Walton, Coyle & Lyons, 2004) in which the author’s (male) sex dictates a particular and gendered interpretation of interviewee subject positions. However, given the study’s social constructionist epistemology, the ability of a researcher to produce ‘impartial’ analyses in deterministic terms is arguably meaningless given continual reformulations of what might be taken as evidence of ‘validity’ in qualitative research (Aguinaldo, 2004). While they offered a standard social context for data collection, it is acknowledged that a more naturalistic study design (e.g., audio recordings of everyday conversation) might have been preferable to semi-structured interviews, yet it is noted that access to conversations involving topics such as ‘non-drinking’ would be extremely problematic to ‘happen across’ via naturalistic means (cf.

Speer, 2002) and that any such content would be inextricably linked to the type of social context in which it occurred. The difficulties in transposing constructions of non-drinkers derived from a principally middle class, white student sample to constructions found in broader British culture should be acknowledged, yet it is important to note that if intolerance of non-drinkers exists within (probably) more liberal student environments, these perceptions might be expected to be even more firmly entrenched within other social settings.

The constructs employed also suggested how social judgements might influence how the integrity of masculine identity is subjectively experienced by abstainers. For example, non-drinking could be presented as incongruous with masculinity, such that male non-drinkers experience pressure to “man up!”. Alternatively, constructions provided by other interviewees (e.g., “the lucky ones”) indicated how male non-drinkers were in some sense liberated from stereotyped gender-role expectations in terms of alcohol consumption. This presents important implications for public health interventions. Specifically, a useful interventional focus may be to challenge the assumption that harmful levels of alcohol consumption represents an acceptable, normative way of asserting male identity, and to contest apprehensions that ‘to not drink’ (either as a lifestyle choice or within specific social situations) can be meaningfully or justifiably equated with identity threat. Current findings indicated that alcohol abstainers could be constructed in positive ways relative to alcohol consumers. For example, discursive accounts casting non-drinking individuals as *more* social than drinkers suggest one route upon which health promotion campaigns might capitalize to promote a more positive view of non-drinking among men: emphasising that diverse modes of masculinity and social behaviour exist beyond those embedded in dominant hegemonic assumptions.

The discursive approach taken in the current study offers insights into how men might be supported in successfully re-negotiating versatile alternative subject positions to those prescribed by configurations of hegemonic masculinity which can be associated with health-compromising behaviours such as harmful drinking (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Ongoing investigation of the meanings and implications of deviance (i.e., non-drinking) from behaviours that are culturally expected of young men (e.g., heavy/harmful drinking) through further research is required. Study findings might have most impact in the context of alcohol marketing strategies where the perpetuation of masculine and feminine stereotypes could be disrupted and reformulated. For example, challenging established notions of alcohol's functional legitimacy and capacity to re-assert masculine identity (to "man up!") may be important. Similarly, problematizing the equation of sophisticated masculinity with possessing a superior technical knowledge of alcoholic drinks via health promotion messages would also support this objective. However, it may be difficult to encourage all men to drink in moderation given the statements made by male participants. For example Mike's claim that he would rather suffer the consequences of heavy drinking than expose himself to the risk of losing important friendships, offers one explanation for exactly *why* moderate drinking may be perceived as threatening or unappealing.

This study employed a discursive perspective to explore the sense-making activities of young alcohol consumers in their construal of non-drinking. This paper offers insights into how both the presence and absence of alcohol consumption and its gender role implications are culturally-reinforced among young adults of both sexes in complex ways.

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